

The Beginning After the End

Volume I Early Years
by TurtleMe



– STORY –

Reincarnated into a new world filled with magic and monsters, the king has a second chance to relive his life. Correcting the mistakes of his past will not be his only challenge, however.

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“The Continent of Dicathen comprises three major Kingdoms: The Forest Kingdom of Elenoir in the North, The Underground Kingdom of Darv nearing the southern border, and The Kingdom of Sapin, located on the

eastern border of the continent. There also exists the Beast Glades, of which a large percentile remains a mystery. Not much of the Beast Glades has been traversed due to the abundance of beasts that are hostile to travelers as well as each other. Yet, every year, countless expeditions have been made due to the tempting riches one could reap.....”

Flip.

“.....The Kingdom of Elenoir is the homeland of the Elf race, located deep in the Forest of Elshire where thick mist naturally forms, deterring all but the elves, who, with their acute senses, can navigate freely...”

Flip.

“.....The Kingdom of Darv is a network of underground passages and enormous caves that can span up to several kilometers, whereupon the Dwarvin race reside.”

Flip.

“...The Kingdom of Sapin is easily the largest and most populated region in the continent. While this Kingdom is primarily composed of humans, there are also many merchants from the Dwarvin race, trading commodities of many...”

Flip.

“...While the Beast Glades house countless monsters and creatures, they also contain wondrous treasures with long forgotten origins, obtainable by those who dare to seek them. There are records, written by adventurers and mercenaries, about dungeons and lairs of powerful entities that can make even the most generous priest into a greedy...”

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Flip.

“...Between the Forest of Elshire and the Kingdom of Sapin lies the Grand Mountain range which spans across roughly 90% of the continent, separating the North and East from the West and South...”

Flip.

“While the Kingdom of Darv and Sapin hold a symbiotic relationship for resources, the Elves seclude themselves and act aggressively towards every other...”

Flip.

Closing the worn covers of what seemed to be an encyclopedia of this world, Arthur rubbed the bridge of his nose with his pudgy fingers, downcast, while emanating a gloom that was almost tangible. He let out an audible half-sigh that only seemed appropriate with his toothless mouth...

“PHUUUUUK...”

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I never believed in the whole “light at the end of the tunnel” folly where people, after experiencing near-death experiences, would startle awake in a cold sweat, exclaiming,

“I saw the light!”

But here I am, currently at this so-called “tunnel” facing a glaring light, when the last thing I remember was sleeping in my room (others call it the royal chamber).

Did I die? If so, how? Was I assassinated?

I don’t remember wronging anyone, but then again, being a powerful public figure gave others all sorts of reasons to want me dead.

Anyway...

Since it doesn't seem like I was going to wake up anytime soon, while I slowly gravitate towards this bright light, I might as well go along with it.

The journey seemed to take an eternity; I half-expected a choir of children to be singing an angelic hymn, beckoning me towards what I hoped would be heaven.

Instead, my vision of everything around me turned into a blur of bright red as sounds assaulted my ears. When I tried to say something, the only sound that came out seemed to be a cry.

The muffled voices became clearer and I made out a: "Congratulations Sir and Madam, he's a healthy boy."

...Wait.

I guess normally, I should be thinking something along the lines of, "Shit, was I just born? Am I a baby now?"

But strangely, the only thought that seemed to pop up in my mind was, 'So the bright

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light at the end of the tunnel is the light coming through into the female vag... '

Haha... let's not think about it anymore.

Assessing my situation in rational king-like manner, I noticed, first of all, that wherever this place was, I understood the language. That's always a good sign.

Next, after slowly and painfully opening my eyes, my retinas were bombarded with different colors and figures. It took a bit of time for my infant eyes to get used to the light. The doctor in front of me, or so it

seemed, had a not-so-appealing face with long, greying hair on both head and chin. I swear his glasses were thick enough to be bulletproof. The strange thing was, he wasn't wearing a doctor's gown nor were we even in a hospital room.

I seemed to have been born from some satanic summoning ritual because this room was lit only by a couple of candles and we were on the floor over a bed of straw.

I looked around and saw the female who pushed me out of her tunnel. Calling her mother should be fair. Taking a few more seconds to see what she looked like, I'd have to admit that she's a beauty, but that might have been caused by my half-blurry eyes.

Rather than a glamorous beauty, I would better describe her as lovely, in a very kind and gentle sense, with distinct auburn hair and brown eyes. I couldn't help but notice her long eyelashes and perky nose that made me want to just cling to her. She just permeated this motherly feel. Is this why babies were attracted to their mothers?

I peeled my face away and turned right to barely make out the person who I assumed was my father by the idiotic grin and teary eyes he gazed at me with. Immediately, he said, "Hi little Art, I'm your daddy. Can you say dada?" I glanced around to see both my mother and the house doctor (for all the certification he seemed to have), roll their eyes as my mother managed to scoff, "Honey, he was just born."

I took a closer look at my father and I can see why my lovely mother was attracted to him. Besides the few loose screws he seemed to have by expecting a newborn to articulate a two-syllable word (I'm just going to give him the benefit of the doubt and think he said that out of the joy of becoming a father), he was a very charismatic-looking man with a cleanly shaven square jaw line that complimented his features. His hair, a very ashy brown color, seemed to be kept trim, while his eyebrows were strong and fierce, extending in a sword-like fashion meeting to a V shape. Yet, his eyes held a gentle quality, whether it was from the way his eyes drooped a bit at the end or from

the deep blue, almost sapphire, hue that radiated from his irises.

“Hmm, he isn’t crying. Doctor, I thought newborns were supposed to cry when they are born.” I heard my mother’s voice.

By the time I finished checking out... I mean observing my parents, the wannabe doctor simply excused himself, saying, “There are cases where the infant does not cry. Please continue resting for a couple of days Mrs. Leywin, and let me know if anything happens to Arthur, Mr. Leywin.”

The following couple of weeks after my journey out of the tunnel was a new kind of torture for me. I had little to no motor control over my limbs except being able to wave them around, and even that got tiring quickly. I realized all too grudgingly that babies don’t really get to control their fingers all that much.

I don’t know how to break it to you guys, but when you place your finger on a baby’s palm, they don’t grab it because they like you, they grab it because it’s like getting hit in the funny bone; it’s a reflex. Forget motor control, I can’t even excrete my wastes at my discretion. I was not yet the master of my own bladder. It just... came out. Haa...

On the bright side, one of the few perks that I became happily accustomed to was being breastfed by my mother.

Don’t get me wrong, I had no ulterior motives whatsoever. It’s just that breast milk tasted a lot better than baby formula and has better nutritional value, okay? Er...

please believe me.

The Satanic demon-summoning place seemed to be my parents’ room and from what I figured, the place that I was currently stuck in was, hopefully, a place in my world from the past, when electricity hadn’t yet been invented.

My mother quickly proved my hopes wrong as, one day, she healed a scratch on my leg from when my idiotic father bumped me against a drawer while swinging me around.

No... Not like bandage-and-a-kiss heal, but a full-blown shining light with a faint hum from her freaking hands type of healing.

Where the hell am I?

My mother, Alice Leywin, and my father, Reynolds Leywin, at least seemed to be good

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people, hell, if not the best. I suspect my mother was an angel because I've never met such a kindhearted, warm person. While being carried on her back by a baby cradle-strap of some sort, I went with her to what she called a town. This town of Ashber was more of a glorified outpost, seeing that there were no roads or buildings. We walked on the main dirt trail where tents stood on both sides with various merchants and salesmen selling all sorts of things—from common, everyday necessities to things I couldn't help but raise a brow at, like weapons, armor, and rocks... shining rocks!

The strangest thing that I couldn't seem to get used to was the people carrying weapons like they would a designer bag. I witnessed a man of around 170cm carrying a gigantic war axe that was larger than him! Anyway, mother kept talking to me, probably to try to get me to learn the language faster, while shopping for the day's groceries, exchanging pleasantries with various people passing by or working in the booths. Meanwhile, my body turned against me once again, and I fell asleep... Damn this useless body.

Sitting on the lap of my mother who was caressing me in her bosom, I was intently focused on my dad who was currently reciting a chant, which sounded like a prayer to the earth, for close to a good minute. I leaned in closer and closer, almost falling off my human seat while expecting some magical phenomenon, like an earthquake splitting the ground or a giant

stone golem emerging. After what seemed like an eternity (trust me, for an infant who has the attention span of a goldfish, it was), three adult, human-sized boulders emerged from the ground and slammed against a nearby tree.

What in the name of... that was it?

I flailed my arms in anger, but my idiot father interpreted that as a “WOW” and had a big grin on his face, saying, “Your daddy is awesome, huh?!”

No, my father was a much better fighter. When he put on his two iron gauntlets, even I felt compelled to drop my underwear (or diaper) for him. With quick and firm movements that were surprising for his build, his fists carried enough force to break the sound barrier, but were fluid enough to not leave an opening. In my world, he would have been classed as a high-tier fighter, leading a squad of soldiers, but to me, he was my idiot father.

From what I learned, this world seemed to be a fairly straightforward one filled with magic and warriors; where power and wealth decided one’s rank in society. In that sense, it wasn’t too different from my old world, except for the lack of technology and

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the slight difference between magic and ki.

In my old world, wars had become an almost obsolete form of settling disputes between countries. Don’t get me wrong, of course there were still smaller-scale battles and armies were still needed for the safety of the citizens. However, disputes concerning the wellbeing of a country were based on either a duel between the rulers of their country, limited to making use of ki and close combat weapons, or a mock battle between platoons, where limited firearms were allowed, for smaller disputes.

Therefore, Kings weren’t the typical fat men sitting on thrones, ignorantly commanding others. They had to be the strongest fighters to represent his or her countries.

Enough about that though.

The currency in this new world seemed pretty straightforward from the exchanges my mother had with the merchants.

Copper was the lowest form of currency, then silver, followed by gold. While I had yet to see anything costing as much as a gold coin, normal families seemed to be able to live off of a couple copper coins a day just fine.

100 Copper = 1 Silver

100 Silver = 1 Gold

Everyday involved honing my new body, mastering the motor functions residing deep within me.

But that comfortable regimen soon changed.

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I was a King. I could have my country's army assemble at my feet, kneeling down with the snap of a finger. I've out-dueled my competitors from different countries as well as my own people to settle disputes and maintain my position. In terms of swordsmanship and controlling Ki, I was second to none, for having personal strength was essential to becoming a ruler in my past world on Earth. Kings weren't born, but raised. Yet, I couldn't think of a prouder moment in my two lives than now.

I can crawl, baby!

'Til now, I had to make do with the stories mother would tell me while trying to make me fall asleep. I grumbled out noises of complaint when she stopped too early. My father would sometimes sit me on his lap while idly

talking to me about his old days, which gave me some hints as to what kind of world this was and what it was filled with.

Reynolds Leywin, former adventurer, (apparently that's a viable occupation in this world) had quite a lot of experience in this field. He was a part of several parties that went on expeditions to search for treasure and fulfill missions they acquired from the Adventurer Guild. He eventually settled down when he met my mother at the Kingdom's border in a city called Valden. He proudly told me how my mother fell head over heels for him at first sight when he visited the town's Adventurer Guild hall that she had been working in at that time, but I suspected it was the exact opposite from how my mother slapped him across the back of the head and told him to stop telling me lies.

My name is Arthur Leywin now, by the way. Art for short, which, as a former King, sounded a little too cute, but hey, after getting a glimpse of myself in the metal sheet they used as a mirror in the washroom, I looked absolutely adorable. I got my mother's glowing auburn hair while my eyes were a bright azure color, inherited from my father.

I don't know how my facial features are going to turn out as I mature, but as long as I don't turn out fat, it'll be okay.

Watch out future ladies! Prepare to be heartbroken!

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After weeks of attempting to crawl, yet only achieving an uncoordinated scuffle in place, I had finally succeeded; even managing to sneak into the family's library/study room while my mother was hanging the laundry out to dry. Mother rued the day I started to become mobile, sighing, "I swear, you're going to become as hard to manage as your father."

I closed the encyclopedia and situated myself more comfortably on the ground...

basically I just laid on my belly because crawling and sitting upright was so damn tiring.

Pondering over what I had just read, this world seemed pretty underdeveloped. From what I could infer, there didn't seem to be much technological advancement. The only source of transportation appeared to be horse-driven carriages that varied in size for overland use, and ships with sails for rivers.

Weapons were freely allowed and not really regulated unless you were visiting the royal family or people that held authority. For God's sake, it continues to baffle me every time I see people carrying weapons while shopping for groceries.

Sure, in my previous world, Earth, there were soldiers and guards who carried concealed weapons. Despite that, they weren't carried for the purpose of killing, but to deter crimes from happening.

Here, though, I witnessed a thief who stole a couple of items from the armory store the other day get slashed in the back by a large, bald mercenary carrying a polearm.

Moreover, the bystanders even went as far as to applaud that oversized monk as the thief lay there, dying.

A similarity that both this world and my previous world shared was the system of monarchy. The continent of Dicathen had Kingdoms, each ruled by a King and his royal family. Unlike Earth though, the King was chosen based on lineage; the title was passed down from the son of the King to his son, and so on.

After scanning through the encyclopedia, there didn't seem to be much information on other continents besides the one we were currently in. I found this a bit odd since there were ships that carried goods and passengers across the continent by river. I just assumed that maybe the technology on ships hadn't been developed enough to

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sail across oceans.

One thing that was going to be hard to get used to was the whole premise of magic in this world. If we were talking about superhuman powers, sure, the countries on Earth relied on such people.

On Earth, practitioners learned how to condense and utilize the innate ki that they had in their bodies. Think of it as a muscle, if you will. Repeatedly breaking the ki center down through exhaustion followed by rest would cause the ki center to grow stronger, allowing access to a bigger pool of ki. The ki would then be channeled throughout the body via special veins or meridians and utilized for the strengthening of the body and weapon.

In this world, instead of ki, it seemed to be called mana, and the more surprising thing was that it existed in the atmosphere. Thus, Practitioners, or Mages, would use the surrounding mana and draw it into their bodies, ultimately condensing it in their mana core. In my old world, ki only existed and formed inside the body. Whether ki had never existed in Earth's atmosphere in the first place or ceased to exist because of the pollution caused by humans, we'd never know.

On Earth, while practice was incredibly important, the size of a user's innate ki center was even more important because the limited amount of ki one had in his body was all one could work with. Did that mean that one's innate mana core size wouldn't matter as much because of the available mana in the atmosphere?

The bigger the cup, the more you can hold, right?

In my old world, even though my ki center wasn't that large, I was considered a prodigy at channeling and utilizing my ki effectively to make up for my not so sufficiently large ki center. With the way I utilized every bit of my ki, I was able to become the strongest of the elite division of Duelists, earning the right to become King.

Now, if I could still practice the way ki practitioners used their ki but with mana, that was both present inside the mana core and in the surrounding

atmosphere, couldn't I essentially double... no... triple the strength that I had before?

The next book that I managed to pull from the bottom shelf explained a couple of questions for me.

“Beginner’s Guide for the Privileged Mage”

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“While the power to control mana is largely genetic, there are many cases where children of Magi come out unable to sense the mana around them. A recent census showed that roughly one in every one hundred children are able to sense mana, but the extent of which could only be tested when their mana core first completely developed—anywhere from their early adolescence to late teen years. It will be apparent when a mage first awakens by the initial repulsion of the surrounding mana when their mana core manifests. This results in a translucent barrier forming around the awakened that lasts a couple of minutes.”

Flipping through the pages, I found something that caught my attention.

“...Mana can be used in a couple of ways. The two most common methods of utilizing mana are: enhancement of the body with mana (augmenter), and emission of mana to the outside world (conjurer)...”

“...augmenters are most commonly seen amongst warriors who utilize mana, channeling it through their body to strengthen themselves and their attacks.”

“...The practice of conjuring is seen in Mages, who, after utilizing their mana, can cast spells to give off a certain effect on the surrounding area or directly at a target.”

Weaknesses and Limitations

“While augmenters can possess incredible strength, defense and agility, their weakness lies in their limited range...”

“Conjurers possess unfathomable powers, being able to bend their surroundings to their will. However, such powers come with limits. Unlike augmenters, who utilize most of the mana in their own mana cores, conjurers need to borrow mana from the outside world, in addition to their own mana core, to exert mana into their surroundings in the form of a spell.”

“While both types of Mages, or Mana Manipulators, for the more scientifically accurate term, depend on and are categorized by their mana core, augmenters and conjurers also have different ways of measuring their aptitude.”

Flip.

“An augmenter’s prowess or talent is measured by the strength of the mana channels in their body, which measures the speed and efficiency in relocating their mana from

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their mana core into various parts of their bodies...”

“...A conjurer’s power and talent, comparatively, is measured by the power of their mana veins, which indicates the speed and effectiveness of absorbing mana from the outside world to cast a spell.”

Flip.

“...Mages (Mana Manipulators) are typically categorized into one of these two divisions since attempting to become proficient in both from an early stage is incredibly time consuming and inefficient. Most are born with a skewed difference in their mana channels and mana veins...”

“...augmenters do not need very strong mana veins because they mostly utilize the mana from their cores, while conjurers do not need very powerful mana channels because they do not release their mana into their own bodies.”

“As proficiency level rises, the distinction between augmenters and conjurers lessens naturally, but that is only so at an advanced level...”

Hmm... So my idiot father seems to be a decently competent augments and a less than average conjurer.

That healing light though... What was my mother?

Flip, flip, flip.

AHA!

“There are a few, rare deviants. The two most well-known types of deviants are elemental deviants and Emitters. While some still remain undiscovered, ones that are highly sought after are the Emitters, more commonly known as healers. Healers possess the rare ability to cast their unique restorative mana unto others, directly, recovering injuries and impairments.”

Wow... mother is the best.

Fundamentals of Conjuring

“The proper steps of utilizing mana for conjurers is to gather the surrounding mana

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in the area, drawing it into your body, then, after circulating it into your mana core to stabilize and purify the atmosphere's diluted mana, you channel it into an appropriate conductor (a staff, wand, ring, of some sort) with the incantations as a mental controller for your will into shaping the mana into whatever spell you want...”

Flip.

“...The more powerful the spell, the longer it will take to draw in surrounding mana, store it in your mana core, where it is condensed and purified, and finally channel and release...”

Flip.

“Because conjuring involves exerting focused mana into a particular spell, conjurers will notice that they have a special aptitude of certain elements (Air, Water, Fire, Earth), but with proper training, can become adequate in the basics of all elements.

Flip.

Fundamentals of Augmenting

“Unlike conjuring, much less time can be spent gathering the surrounding mana.

Efficient use of augmenting requires speed and precision in the use of the mana from your core and less from the mana in the atmosphere...”

This was where it clicked... augmenting was very close to using ki, except you could also draw mana in from your surroundings. The reason why there weren't any kinds of conjurers in my old world was because there was no mana in the atmosphere to draw from and create a phenomenon.

My gaze tensed as I read on.

“...augmenting requires proper distribution of mana into different parts of the body, depending on how the user sees fit. While it seems simple at a glance, augmenting requires much insight into the individual's own body. Being able to utilize the mana channels efficiently requires years of both mental and physical practice.”

Flip.

“Because augmenting involves extracting mana in its purest form from the user’s

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mana core, there are no highly notable distinctions in an elemental sense at an early stage. However, augmenters are able to control their mana more freely, resulting in vastly different forms of fighting through augmentation.”

Flip.

“The phenomenon called ‘Backlash’ occurs in both types of practitioners. For augmenters, it occurs from depletion of the mana core, causing extreme bodily pain, depending on how strenuous the damage to the mana core is. For conjurers, Backlash occurs from the overfilling of the mana core. This is caused by overuse of spells beyond the practitioner’s capacity, or using a spell too powerful for the mana core to handle.”

Closing the book, I propped myself up on my butt, digesting the overload of information I had just read.

Because of the uncanny similarities between the ki center from my old world and the mana core in this world, I found it hard to believe that you needed to be a young adolescent to manipulate mana. In my old world, children could already meditate and sense the ki scattered inside their bodies. Once the ki migrated into a single place, the ki center would form.

Testing my hypothesis, I began meditating, trying to sense the mana in my seven-month-old body when...

“There you are! Art, honey, are you having trouble taking a poopy?”

Mother! I’m about to begin my journey to become the greatest mage in the world! Do not make me out to be a constipated infant!

Picking me up and gently placing me in her arms, I was forcibly taken away to have my diaper changed, which, surprisingly, was full by the time I

noticed.

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ALICE LEYWIN'S POV:

Arthur had to be the most adorable baby, and I'm not saying this because I'm a doting mother.

No.

Him and his scruffy little patch of glowing auburn hair and playful eyes that almost radiated blue light while his gaze, at times, seemed almost... intelligent.

No no, I told you, I'm not a doting mother. I plan to be a strict and just mother. I can't rely on my husband to teach little Art any common sense. For God's sake, he tried to teach my baby how to fight when he could barely crawl!

I knew this little rascal would turn out just like his father if I left him be. As soon as he started crawling, I was so proud that I was on the verge of shedding tears, but I didn't know how much of a handful he'd be as soon as he became mobile.

I swear, there's not a single moment where I can take my eyes off of him before he crawls into the study room. How weird. We made sure to buy him lots of stuffed animals and wooden toys to play with, but he always ends up going to the study room.

THAT, at least, was directly opposite of his father, seeing how Reynolds almost gravitates away from texts longer than the weekly newspaper.

Looking at how excited he got when we went out to town, I decided to go shopping for food once every other day instead of twice a week.

No no, I told you, I'm not a doting mother. This is for his education of the outside world and for fresh food in the house. Yeah haha... that's it.

My son seemed to be interested in a lot of things. I can't get enough of seeing his head, that seemed so disproportional to his little body, turning left and right while trying to take in everything around him. He seemed particularly intrigued by his father's

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practices.

Reynolds was a pretty competent adventurer back in the day. Being a B-class adventurer by the age of twenty-eight was actually a pretty fast climb. Acquiring an E-class rank, the lowest rank, required taking a test to prevent us from sending eager but ignorant adolescents to their deaths. As for the higher ranks, I've only seen a couple of A-class adventurers in my years of working at the guild, and I've yet to see an S-class adventurer, assuming they actually exist.

At the Adventurer Guild, or what we just called the Guild Hall back then in Valden, I got to see too many eager teens. I swear, I was surprised they didn't float away from having their overly inflated egos get to their heads.

At least they were ambitious.

One time, I was assigned to proctor a basic practical exam, where the examinee had to simply demonstrate fundamental competency in their mana manipulation, but before the test had even begun, the kid fell straight onto his back because the sword he was carrying had been too heavy for him.

Speaking of airheads, Reynolds sure came off as one back then. The moment he saw me in the Guild Hall, his jaw literally dropped and he just stood there until the guy in line behind him elbowed him to hurry up. He hurriedly wiped away his drool and managed to mumble a "...H-hi... can I trade in th-the stuff for the mission?" I just giggled as he turned beet red from embarrassment.

He managed to gather up the courage to ask me out for dinner and we just hit it off from there. Even now, I can't help but smile when I see his droopy, blue puppy eyes looking at me.

Art somehow wound up with both of our redeeming traits, making him that much more adorable. You should see him when I have to change his diapers. I don't know why, but he always turns red in his cheeks and covers his face with his tiny little fingers.

Could babies his age even get embarrassed?

The next landmark that made it to my baby journal, which is purely for educational purposes, by the way, and not because I am a doting mother, was when he first said mama.

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He said Mama!

I told him to say "mama" again and again, just to make sure I didn't hear wrong.

Reynolds sulked for the entire day because Art said "mama" before "dada."

Haha, I won!

The rest of the year went by pleasantly with my son sticking by me wherever I went and frequently looking out the window to see his father practice after dinner. I'm glad Reynolds gave up being an adventurer and instead took up a post as a guard nearby for our town. Being an adventurer may have brought in more money, but not knowing when or if my husband would come home was not worth any amount of extra money.

More so after that incident...

To our relief, Little Art never got sick, but oftentimes, I would find him sitting still on his butt while closing his eyes. At first, I thought he was

having trouble relieving himself, but after checking the first couple of times, that didn't seem to be the case.

How strange, I didn't know what to make of it. I thought babies his age were supposed to be energetic and flighty, but after his episodes of escaping to the study room, he seemed to spend a lot of time sitting still, almost meditating.

I was worried at first, but although it would happen a couple times a day, it only lasts for a couple of minutes, and Art would seem strangely happy afterwards. The way he holds his arms up and looks up at me makes me just want to gobble him up.

Ahem Not a doting mother.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

About two years have passed since I made my difficult journey to the study room.

From then, I had been constantly trying to gather the little bits of mana spread out in my body and focus it in an attempt to form a mana core. Let me tell you, it was a slow and arduous task. I would find myself having an easier time trying to learn how to walk on my hands and eat with my feet in this damnable body than trying to will my mana core to condense.

I could see why the book said that it'd take until at least the adolescent age for a person to 'awaken.' If I had let the mana particles in my body move by themselves, it would

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take at least a decade for them to gravitate towards each other to form anything remotely close to a mana core.

Instead... A perk in having the mental capacity of an adult meant that I had the cognitive ability to consciously will my mana particles together. This

was something I did as a child in my past life in school, where they taught you from childhood to learn how to control ki. Essentially, it's being able to sense the ki, or mana now, in your own body and force them together near the solar plexus. If left alone, the particles will eventually slowly float towards each other anyway, but I'm just grabbing the feathers and shoving them into the twill sack instead of waiting for them to float down by themselves, figuratively speaking of course.

Daily rituals consisted of me trying to spend as much of my limited energy as possible on gathering my mana while avoiding suspicion from my mother and father. My father seemed to think that throwing a child into the air would be quite enjoyable for the child. While I understand there would be a kind of adrenaline effect that may excite some people, when mana was used to reinforce his arms, and I got thrown into the air like a high-speed projectile, the only feeling I had was nausea and a traumatic fear of heights.

Fortunately, my mother had a pretty firm handle on my father, but she scared me sometimes. I often caught her staring at me, half-drooling, looking at me like I'm some kind of premium slab of meat.

I tried to adapt to my body by only talking in very simple sentences. After I first said

“mama” to let her know I wanted more food, she almost burst into tears of joy. It's been a long time since I received this sort of motherly affection. Since then, I limited myself to just trying to talk enough to get the point across, no grammar necessary.

Besides that, the pace of my training was strenuous and slow, but I was getting a pretty big head start compared to everybody else, so I wasn't complaining.

These past two years, have not gone to waste, for I finally gathered all of my mana into my solar plexus and was in the midst of condensing a mana core when...

BOOM

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REYNOLDS LEYWIN'S POV:

My baby boy!

I'm so happy we had a son. I wonder, when can babies start training? When did I start training again? Man, I can't wait to teach my baby boy all about magic! I hope he turns out to be an augmenter like his old pops. I may know the basics of conjuring, but I can't do anything practical with it except use it as a form of mental exercise.

Alice, on the other hand, is one of the most talented people I've ever seen. Even as an Emitter, she's exceptional. Back then, after she agreed to date me, she joined my party and we went on missions together. Her restorative powers were amazing in and of itself, but what shocked me the most was when she used an area of effect spell, which healed all allies inside. Talk about one of a kind! And I'm her husband!

Hehe... I still don't get tired of saying that.

Back in the good old days before we had to settle down, we would go into Beast Glades and hunt for mana beasts. Mana beasts were various unique animals and creatures that were born with the ability to absorb mana into their bodies and create their own mana core, which we call beast cores.

Beast cores had an unlimited amount of uses, making them very valuable and highly sought after. Of course, the higher the classes the beast cores were, the more valuable they were. Mana beasts were classified anywhere from E class (the domesticated fanged bull used for meat and leather), to your SS class monster. I can't tell you much about those, simply because I've never seen nor heard of one, but supposedly they do exist.

Rule of thumb, you should assume that the mana beasts are stronger than humans of the same class. This was simply because, even if we take mana

out of the picture, a beast's physical body was much stronger than the average human's.

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While the Beast Glades were dangerous, as long as you were cautious and didn't get lost, it was pretty easy to keep yourself out of trouble. The stronger beasts tended to be further down in dungeon-like caves underground or farther away. The first few tens of kilometers of the Beast Glades are pretty well-mapped, and as long as you were at least a C class adventurer, you'd be fine.

Once in a while, there were missions posted up that required a couple parties of adventurers. Those were usually for trying to clear and map the harder dungeons that weren't fully explored. If a mana beast had the power to create its own lair and have other mana beasts serve him, then you could bet there were treasures to be gained.

I tell my son Art all about this life, telling him this and much more so I can brainwa... I mean encourage him to at least have some experience as an adventurer when he gets older.

I don't know what I'll do if little Art never awakens. Oh God, it doesn't matter how long it takes. As long as he can train to become any kind of mage, I'll be a proud and happy father.

It's pretty easy to tell what type of mage someone will be when they awaken, because while augmenters, conjurers, and deviants form a translucent barrier, the mana behaves differently around them during that time.

Augmenters, when they first awaken, form a sort of pushing force around the barrier, signifying that they have dominant mana channels in their body. Conjurers, on the other hand, form a vacuum of mana around them, which means their mana veins are much more dominant. Of course, the degrees of the pushing force and vacuuming force depends on their talent in either category.

I don't mean to brag, but when I first awakened, at the early age of twelve, by the way, I was sleeping, and the pushing force made me float for a good couple of minutes!

Enough force to lift a human body!

If it wasn't for that time... I'm sure we wouldn't have settled down this fast.

Anyways, as soon as he awakens, I'm going to train him. If he ends up becoming a conjurer, I think I can get him a tutor from the main town since Alice and I aren't adept enough to be teaching him...

...Is what I said, but...

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BOOM!

Currently, 3/4th of the house is gone...

What happened?

Luckily I was with Alice in the front yard for a bit after dinner, but... Art... Little Art was still in the house...

“ARTHUR!!”

Alice's face drained of all blood as I saw her go pale, eyes wide in disbelief and worry.

I nudged my wife down while covering her with a temporary shield that would last for a few minutes.

I rushed towards the direction of the explosion, shielding my body with a layer of mana over my skin. The debris from what was left of my house was constantly thrown towards me as I reached deeper into the source of the

explosion. After fighting my way through the scraps of what was left of my house and several pieces of rocks, I saw it.

My son had the all but noticeable translucent barrier flickering around him. Better yet, the pushing force of his awakened powers was what caused this explosion. He was floating in the center of a crater that cleared 3/4th of our house, as well as our entire backyard.

Haha...

My legs gave out and I just landed on my knees while I continued to gape at this sight.

My son was almost three years old when he awakened. Only three...

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Reynolds! Honey!"

I glanced back at my wife with my mouth still hanging from shock. She managed to slowly make her way towards me, after there was no more debris to be thrown out.

She was making half-steps towards me, covering her face with her arms to shield what she could from the strong pushing force still emanating out of Art.

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"Reynolds! What happened? What's going on? Where's Art?"

Still unable to find the strength to speak, I simply pointed my finger towards the direction of our son.

While confused, she looked in the direction I was pointing and all she could manage to whisper was, "Oh my..."

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Wow, I feel great!

Feeling refreshed at my breakthrough, I closed my eyes to sense my newly-formed mana core. My sweet little mana core!

“ART! OH, MY BABY! Are you okay?”

I spotted my mother rushing towards me while my father was on the ground kneeling.

What did he do this time that caused him to get punished by mother?

My mother lifted me up and hugged me, almost to the point where my underdeveloped ribs gave out.

I managed to squeal out a “Mom, no cry. What’s wrong?”

She didn’t answer me and continued sobbing while cradling me. My father arrived next to her, patting her back and patting my head as well, giving me a weak smile.

After a brief moment of confusion, I peeled my head away from my mother’s bosom and I looked around to see that we were standing in the center of a giant crater, with most of our house gone.

...What the fuck?

Who did this? Who dares have the audacity to destroy the home of a King?! The perpetrators will rue this day! I will hunt them down day and night and not rest until...

“Congrats, Art honey. You awakened, Champ.”

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I did this?

In my old world on Earth, a similar phenomenon happened when a youth awakened.

A clear barrier appeared around the awakened and a small pushing force would surround the barrier. I'm guessing, though, that the pushing force in this world was lot stronger because of the mana in the atmosphere, something that wasn't there back on Earth.

As once a King of integrity, I decided on apologizing for this... err... situation.

"I'm sorry Mom, Dad. Am I in trouble?"

"Haha... No, Art honey, you're not in trouble. We were just worried about you. I'm glad you're alright." My mother managed to chuckle through half teared eyes.

My idiot father, on the hand, was a lot more excited.

"My boy is a genius! Awakened at the age of less than three! This is unprecedented! I thought I was fast, but jeez!"

So a couple of moments of a picture perfect atmosphere was broken when a neighbor passing by screamed, "What in the world?!"

"Haha, we better clean this mess up," my father said as he grinned, rubbing the back of his head.

A couple of weeks had passed since my awakening. We decided to keep my awakening a secret for now. My father managed to contact a couple of his past Adventurer party members to help rebuild the decimated part of our house while we stayed in the nearby inn. With conjurers raising the ground for the foundation of the house and augmenters doing the grunt work, the house didn't take too long to finish. The beauty of magic! Surprisingly,

none of my father's ex party members seemed to question why our house blew up.

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That seemed to say a lot about my idiot father.

During the middle of reconstructing our house, my birthday came around (May 29).

My parents woke me up that morning with a present, and what seemed to be a loaf of... bread (?) in their hands.

Ahh! It was a cake!... Would've been easier to tell if it wasn't black.

Opening the present box to find a carefully carved, wooden sword, I hugged both my parents, thanking them for the present and the cake.

This surprised me because my parents didn't bother to celebrate my past two birthdays, so I assumed this world didn't really celebrate it. I later found out that birthdays are celebrated starting at the age of 3 because of a tradition from a long time ago, when babies were more susceptible to death before the age of three.

How medieval.

Another thing I took an interest in noticing.

Seeing children, as well as teens working on farms with their family and forges as apprentice blacksmiths made me realize there was no mandatory form of a structured education system. Any sort of rudimentary education was provided by their families (just basics like reading and writing).

As soon as I turned three, my mother began giving me lessons for a set time, teaching me how to read and write. Playing the role of a genius son, I pretended to learn quickly, to her delight, so I could read harder books in the library without drawing suspicion.

These last couple of weeks passed by in a blast. After awakening, my father taught me the basics of mana and how to start training in it as best as he could. He tried to simplify as much as possible so that a toddler could understand it, I guess, but if it weren't for my adult comprehensive abilities, I don't think I would've retained much.

The basics are as follows:

An easy way to know where you stand in strength lies in the color of your mana core.

When you start off, the mana core is black, due to the body's blood and other impurities mixed with the mana particles as they formed together to become a mana core. As the mana inside the person's body becomes purer and the impurities are

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filtered out, it'll change into a dark red color. From there, the lighter the mana core's color became; from dark red, to a red, and then to a lighter red.

The order goes as follows: black, red, orange, yellow, silver, and then white.

From the red mana core until the yellow mana core, the colors split into three shades of that said color (Dark Orange, Solid Orange, Light Orange). Rule of thumb, the lighter the mana core's color was, the purer one's mana core was, and the more power they would have access to.

While the lessons with my father proved useful, I was getting impatient at the pace we were moving at. I asked mother a couple days later, "Mom, can I get books on magic?"

Since my mother still had some connections in the Guild Hall (Adventurer Guild), she managed to acquire a pretty wide collection of books on basic mana manipulation, as well as fighting with different weapons. Some of them were just picture books with only simple words and mostly pictures of basics on how mana was condensed, but I ignored those. My mother gave

me a strange look because the books that I'd been looking at were on a higher level. She assumed I wouldn't even be able to understand most of the words in there and tried to cajole me into some of the simpler books, saying that it would be easier to understand, but eventually, she relented.

A typical day would involve taking reading and writing lessons from mother and augmenting training with my father. After he covered the basic theory and application of augmenting, we started physical training. Seeing how my body was too small to start sparring, we opted to running and body workouts. I think seeing my three-year-old body trying to do a pushup would be the funniest thing, but my father did a good job holding in his laughter.

When I'm not taking either of these lessons, I usually stayed cooped up in the newly improved library, reading and meditating to further condense my mana core.

As the year passed by with not much happening outside of my typical schedule, my father spoke up while we were having dinner one night.

"Honey, I think it's time we get Art a proper mentor."

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A *clang* drowned out the silence as my mother dropped her fork onto her plate.

"What? Reynolds! Arthur isn't even four yet! No! Besides, you said that if our son was an augments, you'd be able to teach him!" Mother spoke with an evident desperation.

"I also never expected our son to be this much of a prodigy in mana manipulation. Who has ever heard of an awakening at the age of three?" Father responded a lot more calmly.

“But that means he’ll have to leave home! He’s only four, Reynolds! We can’t have our baby leave home at such an early age!”

“You don’t get it. When I observe his body while he meditates, I can’t help but feel that all of this is natural to him. Alice honey, I’m holding my son back by trying to teach him something he can do in his sleep.”

Thus began my parents’ quarrel.

They went back and forth, basically repeating their initial points; mother kept saying that I was too young, father kept saying that they couldn’t hold me back from reaching my full potential, blah blah.

In the meantime, I was playing a game of war with my food—the peas attacked for the Mother Empire, while the carrots of the Father Nation desperately defended their land.

Finally, my parents settled down and my father turned to me.

“Art, this is concerning you, so you have a say in this as well. How would you feel about going to a big city and having a teacher?”

Fantastic...

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I applauded the effort for trying to make this fair, though I don’t think he realized he was trying to ask a four-year-old to make a decision that would ultimately change his life.

Trying to conclude this little argument, I said, “Can I at least try meeting some mentors and have them see if I need to be tutored or not?”

Silence.

Did I step on a land mine? Was I not supposed to be this articulate in my sentences at my current age? Are they mad because I didn’t choose a side?

Having no confidence in keeping a poker face, I looked down and waited for their response.

Thankfully, none of my fears were on their minds. My mother finally spoke. Quietly, she muttered, “We’ll at least formally have his mana core and channels tested. We can figure out what to do from there.”

As my father nodded in agreement, we began making preparations the next day. When I said what I did last night, I assumed we’d be going to a nearby town or city, a day’s worth of travel away, maximum, to have me tested by a qualified mage. Boy, was I wrong.

We were making preparations for a three-week-long journey. A journey on a carriage, pulled by a couple of horses through the Grand Mountains to a city called Xyrus.

A book I had read popped into my mind. I recalled reading about a floating piece of land built by an elite organization of conjurers for the sole purpose of housing the most prestigious Mage Academy. A city was later built around the academy, both the City and the academy named after the leader of the organization, Xyrus.

How was it possible to keep a piece of land, hundreds of kilometers long, afloat?

Magnetism? Then the land beneath the city would be affected by it. Did the city have its own gravitational field?

Anyway!

This journey was going to be long. It’s times like these that I wished modern sources of transportation existed. In order to get to the city, we’d have to enter through one of

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the designated teleportation gates in the Grand Mountains, otherwise, it would easily take months to travel across towns to reach the gate below the actual city, which floated near the border of the Kingdom of Sapin and Darv.

One reason why my father pushed for us to go on this journey now was because his ex-party members had recently stopped by and were on their way to the city of Xyrus.

Going now, with them, meant that we had three augmenters and two conjurers, along with my mother, who was a rare Emitter, and my father, a B-class augmenter. While the mountain range didn't have any mana beasts, there were still the potential dangers of bandits and wild animals.

While my mother and father took care of packing all of the necessities, I packed my wooden sword and two books (Encyclopedia of Dicathen and Foundations of Mana Manipulation) for the journey.

By mid-morning, we were ready to head out.

After tying my knapsack, with my books and a couple of snacks, to my back and strapping my wooden sword to my waist, I grasped my mother's hand and followed my parents to meet their ex-party members.

Although I'd heard about them from time to time from father, I never visited the home while they were helping rebuild it, so it would be my first time meeting them.

The information I learned from my father about the party, Twin Horns, consisted of the following:

Helen Shard: Female augmenter, specializing in magic archery.

Adam Krensh: Male augmenter, whose main weapon was the spear.

Jasmine Flamesworth: Female augmenter, who specialized in speed with dual daggers.

Angela Rose: Female conjurer, specializing in Wind Magic.

Durden Walker: Male conjurer, specializing in Earth Magic.

We reached the inn they were staying at in Ashber and saw them out in front, near the stables.

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My father, hugging his ex-party members, exclaimed, "Fellas, I want you guys to meet my son, Arthur! Go on Art, introduce yourself."

Giving a slight half bow while looking up at them, I introduced myself.

"Hello. My father has told me great things about his fellow Twin Horns members.

Thank you for traveling with us to Xyrus. We'll be in your hands."

"HAHAHA, what is this? Such manners! Are you sure he's your son, Rey?"

The one to respond was the Spear wielder, Adam. Taking a closer look at him, he seemed like the energetic, talkative type. While fairly good-looking, he had bright red hair tied in a messy poof at the end, almost like a flame, and a couple of bangs escaping from the hair tie. He reminded me of some sort of vagabond. His eyes were bright and almost seemed like they were always laughing. The first thing I noticed though, was the scar across his nose, reaching both cheeks.

I felt myself getting picked up.

"Awww... Isn't he just too precious? You should be glad he doesn't look like you, Reynolds."

Peeling my face away from what felt like a memory foam death trap before she suffocated me in those gigantic breasts, I took a good look at the woman who was trying to kill me. Boy, was she pretty. I mean, while not as pretty as my mother, she gave off the whole "royal princess" vibe with her long blond hair that came to a curl at the ends and radiant green eyes that drooped slightly.

Just as my hands were about to give out and my face about to enter the twin abyssal hills, a strong pair of hands grabbed me by the knapsack strapped to my back, whisking me away from the well-endowed woman.

“Angela, you’re hurting him,” a deep voice grunted.

There I hung, like a kitten being carried by his mother by the scruff of his neck, unable to move.

My eyes stayed fixedly on the giant.

Easily passing two meters in height with a staff strapped to his back, the giant carefully

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lowered me back onto the ground and tidied my clothes gently.

How genteel.

I imagined riding on his shoulders like a mighty steed the whole way. I looked up at him, my eyes getting bigger as I pondered.

He had very narrow eyes and eyebrows that slanted down, giving him an almost innocent face, compared to his enormous body that stretched passed two meters. The short, scruffy black hair on his head completed the shaggy dog image on him.

Dusting my clothes off, I turned to face the woman that looked slightly younger than everyone else. She had straight black hair, back half tied up with a ribbon, red, half-opened eyes and curt-looking lips, making her seem very brusque.

“Mhm,” she slightly nodded, and then turned away.

Ah... a woman of few words. How charming.

My eyes fixed on her as she walked away towards the stable. I spotted two short daggers strapped to her lower back, just above the hips.

The last member of the Twin Horns was Helen Shard. She patted my head lightly and smiled a charming smile at me. The word that I would use to describe Miss Helen would be sharp. Sharp eyes, sharp, perky nose, thin red lips, and a flat chest, almost boyish, with her shoulder-length hair tied tightly in the back. I can't help but get charmed by her charismatic ambience. She seemed to exude this 'we can do anything if we believe' atmosphere from her pores that made her practically glow. Clothed in light leather armor covering her chest... I mean, breasts, and bow and arrows strapped to her back, I couldn't help but compare her to an elf, but quickly abandoned that thought after seeing her rounded ears.

I hopped onto the carriage furthest back with the help of a little mana reinforcing my legs. Lately, I'd gotten the hang of using my mana to reinforce my body. I had yet to fully test what I was capable of, in fear of giving my parents heart attacks by showing off too much, but it was getting a bit more natural to direct my mana from my core through my mana channels.

After our party finished loading in all of our travel necessities into the two carriages we were taking, we strapped in what I thought would be horses. It turned out, this

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world has domesticated mana beasts called Skitters for transportation. These giant lizards, with spikes across their backs and powerful claws, were D class monsters that were a lot more efficient to use, and more expensive, than horses when traveling mountain terrain.

Let the journey begin!

By nightfall, the once distant mountain range seemed to have doubled in size. I wondered how big the Grand Mountain range would be when we reached the foot.

Needless to say, I was excited to get out of the tiny outpost of Ashber that is my home town.

We eventually stopped to make camp near a small cluster of boulders. It was a good spot with the rocks blocking off nearly all of the wind and lot of scrap wood from fallen branches to use as campfire.

One thing I detested the most about this body is how much sleep I required. I slept most of the way and I still felt a bit heavy-eyed after being awake for a few hours.

After setting up a couple of tents around the fire, my father and mother had just begun conversing with the Twin Horns about old times when Helen sat down next to me and said nonchalantly, “I heard your pops say that you’re some kind of genius mage... Is it true you’ve already awakened?”

Not knowing how to respond, I just replied with the truth.

She began asking me how I felt when I had awakened and what color my mana core currently was. By this time, a couple of curious ears perked up as Adam asked, “Hey Reynolds, do you mind if I test little Art?”

If I could’ve interjected, I might’ve said something along the lines of, ‘Maybe mock-fighting with someone my age isn’t a great idea since a normal three-year-old’s great accomplishments at this point would be going up and down stairs with alternating feet, walking in a circle, and if he was really coordinated, balancing on one foot for several seconds,’ but I guess these thoughts never occurred to anyone here.

Both my father and mother seemed at least a bit hesitant at first, but trusting their old

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comrade, my father just replied, “Alright, but be careful. I haven’t had the chance to teach him how to properly fight yet. We’ve just been doing light strength and mana exercises ‘til now.”

Adam got up from his makeshift log seat and looked around until he found a short stick he felt satisfied with.

“Come here Kid. Haha, let’s see what you’re made of!”

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I didn’t know if his goal was to beat some sense into the kid he assumed had gotten an inflated ego since he heard I was some sort of genius or if he was genuinely trying to gauge my strength, but by the smug grin he had on his face while looking down at me (even if it was only natural for him to physically look down at me, it still irked me), I assumed it might’ve been for the former reason.

Retrieving the wooden sword, I received as a present from my parents, I walked to the edge of the camp where Adam was waiting near a small clearing.

“You know how to reinforce your weapon right, genius?” he asked.

By this time, my father already sensed that Adam was just trying to put on a show of dominance for his little boy, but he just watched, knowing he wouldn’t hurt me too much.

Many thanks, dear father.

My mother looked a bit more anxious as she kept glancing back and forth between me, Adam, and my father, keeping a firm hold onto her husband’s sleeve.

Well, at least mother was here to heal me if I got hurt, right?

I focused my gaze on Adam, who was just around 5 meters away from me. Images of my past life, dueling other kings with my country and loved ones at stake, popped up into my head. My eyes narrowed, restricting my vision to only the man in front of me.

He was the opponent now.

I willed mana into my legs and dashed forward with both my hands gripping the wooden sword to my right...

His smug look still present, Adam prepared to block my horizontal swing when I feinted and used special footwork I developed in my old world meant for dueling.

Almost instantly, I blinked a foot diagonally to his right. Curse this body! I couldn't

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perfectly execute the skill because of the height and weight difference compared to my old body. I wasn't used to this 40- pound, 110cm body. While I didn't reach the area I was aiming for, unfortunately for Adam, he already prepared his wooden stick to block my swing from the other direction, so his right side was unprotected.

His smug look all but vanished and was replaced by a look of surprise, with his eyes opening wide, as he realized what was about to happen.

Swinging my wooden sword to his open ribcage, I reinforced the sword with mana at the last moment to conserve my mana, because I knew I was definitely at a disadvantage against a veteran like him.

The look of surprise on Adam lasted all but a split second before he pivoted his right foot with almost inhuman speed. I squatted in time to dodge his upward swing and switched my stance from a thrust to a spinning swipe and landed a blow on his left ankle using all my momentum. His ankle gave out at that moment, throwing Adam off balance.

Or so I thought.

He actually did a full on split, followed by a roundhouse sweep with his legs as soon as he was on the ground.

This body wouldn't be able to take a hit like that, so I jumped up to dodge his legs when, from my peripheral view, I saw the flash of brown from his wooden stick.

With no time to use the blade to block the swing, I thrust the pommel of my sword, timing it so Adam's wooden stick and the end of my handle would clash.

Newton's Third Law of Motion suddenly came to mind.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

And boy, was the opposite reaction painful. While I did block the blow successfully, my 4-year-old body couldn't withstand the force of the blow and I flew before gracefully skidding on the ground like a flat rock on a lake.

Thankfully, I reinforced my whole body before I took the blow or I would've seriously gotten hurt.

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Groaning, I sat myself up and rubbed my throbbing head. I looked up, only to see seven stupefied faces staring at me.

My mother recovered first, shaking her head. She rushed towards me and immediately mumbled a healing spell around my body.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Durden thumping Adam's head with enough force to make him stumble forward. Heh~

"Art honey, are you okay? How do you feel?"

“I’m fine Mom, don’t worry.”

Adam’s voice cuts in, “Haven’t taught him how to fight, my ass! How the hell did you train this little monster?” he groaned, still rubbing his head.

“I didn’t teach him that,” my father managed to mutter.

He shook himself out of the stupor and came next to me to ask if I was okay. I just nodded my head.

My father picked me up and gently lowered me back down where I was sitting before and squatted down in front of me so he was eye level.

“Art, where did you learn to fight like that?”

Deciding to feign ignorance, I said, putting on a nonchalant face, “I learned by reading books and watching you, Dad.”

I didn’t think saying, “Hey dad, I was the King Duelist representative of my country from a world where diplomatic and international issues are settled by battles. I just happened to be reincarnated as your son... Surprise,” would get a hearty reaction from him.

“Sorry for roughing you up there, little buddy. I didn’t expect I would need to use that much strength to get you off me.”

Seeing Adam apologize gave me just a bit of a better impression of him. I guess he wasn’t a total jerk.

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I heard a faint voice from my side. “Your fighting style is... unique. How did you do that step after the feint?”

Wow! Two complete sentences! That was the longest string of words Jasmine had said this entire trip, by far.

I feel so honored.

“Thank you?” I responded.

I reorganized my thoughts before trying to explain in steps what I did.

“It’s a simple technique, really. Since I was feinting to Mr. Krensh’s right side, I placed my right foot forward as the last step before the feint. There, I instantly focused my mana into the right foot, pushing myself back, and at the same time, I bring my left leg behind right, aimed at an angle towards where I wanted to go, focusing mana into my left foot this time, but with more power than when I used mana on my right, so that I don’t propel myself backwards instead of the direction I want to actually go to.”

That was a mouthful.

I looked around to see Adam, Helen, and even my father head towards the clearing, trying to test out what I just explained.

When I turned back to face Jasmine, I only saw her back as she rushed towards the clearing as well.

Mother sat down next to me, patting my head with a gentle smile on her face that seemed to say, “you did well.” Angela came up to me too, burying my face, or rather my whole head, in her bosom, cheerfully exclaiming, “Cute AND talented, aren’t you? Why couldn’t you have been born earlier so that this sister could snatch you up herself?!”


Blushing, I willed myself away from those breasts that I suspected to have their own gravitational pull. Those... weapons were dangerous.

My guardian angel, Durden, was a lot calmer about all of this and just gave me a thumbs up. He’s so cool.

The night passed as the four idiots spent most of the time trying to master the feint step while I slept in the tent with Mother.

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A couple of days passed as we finally managed to make it to the foot of the Grand Mountains, which, by the way, sure lived up to its name.

Along the way, only Helen managed to lay down her pride and ask me for some clarification on the feint step. I went over it slowly, explaining what the timing of the interval between the last right foot and the left foot should be and how to properly balance the output of mana into both feet so you could go the way you're aiming. The whole time, I could almost see the ears of the other three idiots getting bigger as they tried to suck in the information that I gave her, nodding while taking mental notes.

The first one to succeed was Jasmine. She seemed like the cold, genius type. I guess it was true.

She pulled me aside one day, nearly blushing, while I was taking reading and writing lessons on the back of the carriage with mother and asked me to watch.

We had to take a small stop so the carriages wouldn't leave us behind. After successfully demonstrating the feint step to me, I applauded saying "Amazing! You learned it so quickly!"

It's one of the most basic techniques I developed, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

She responded curtly saying, "It was nothing," but the upward curvature of her lips and the slight, proud twitch of her nose showed otherwise.

Haha, she's happy.

By the time we had arrived at the foot of the Grand Mountains, all four of the idiots managed to learn the technique, changing it slightly to fit their own fighting style.

The next step of the journey was ascending up the mountains. Luckily, there was a path around two carriages wide that circled around the mountain, eventually leading to the teleportation gate at the top.

The front carriage included Durden, holding the reins in the front, with father besides him to keep him company. This carriage held most of our luggage. Helen was currently seated on the top of the second carriage, the one I was riding in, scouting for any abnormalities. Angela sat in the back carriage with my mom and me, while Adam

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walked behind us, keeping guard. While Jasmine steered the carriage, I kept noticing how she turned her head back and stared at me, almost making *jiii* sounds. Is she expecting me to show her other techniques or something? Every time I met her gaze, she quickly turned her head back to the front.

Is she five?

Speaking of age, I turned 4 on the first leg of our journey to the foot of the Grand Mountains. I don't know when Mother prepared a cake, or where she even put it (or if it's even edible!), but I didn't complain, put on a big smile, and thanked her and everyone else. While everyone gave me a hug or a pat on the back, Jasmine surprised me when she handed me a short knife, simply declaring, "Present."

Aww she cares! I'm tearing up.

Fortunately, our journey up the mountain was rather uneventful. I spent a lot of my time reading my book on mana manipulation, trying to find more discrepancies between mana and ki. So far, it seemed pretty similar except that, in rare cases, an augments' mana usage could take on the property of elements. Reading on, I noticed that for beginners who were able to dabble in this, it wasn't as distinct as what you might see when conjurers casted spells, but more like the quality of each distinct element.

For example, an augments, assuming he has an innate compatibility with fire, would have mana that showed an explosive quality when used. Water would naturally have a smooth, flexible quality. Earth would have a firm and rigid quality. Finally, Wind would have the quality of a sharp blade.

That's strange. Back in my old world, these kinds of qualities in ki had nothing to do with elements, but rather depended on how you utilized your ki. Shaping the ki into points and edges would give it the so-called "wind element," while storing up your mana into a single point and bursting it at the last moment would give it the "fire element" and so on. Sure, practitioners had preferences and were naturally better at practicing one style more than the other, but I wouldn't go as far as to say it was rare.

Only the most basic use of ki involved reinforcing the body and weapons.

I would have to test this with mana in the future. Being stuck in a four-year-old body with constant supervision by suspicious adults made practicing really hard.

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I kept reading on when suddenly, Helen's alarmed voice rang in my ears.

"BANDITS! PREPARE TO ENGAGE!" she shouted as a rumble of footsteps came from our right and rear.

"Submit, O' wind and follow my will. I command and gather you around in protection.

Wind Barrier!" Instantly, I feel a gust of wind forming a tornado around Mother, Angela, and I. Then the gust bent into a sphere around us.

Angela was holding out her wand, concentrating on keeping the barrier active while arrows constantly bombarded the barrier, only to get redirected in a different direction.

My mother pulled me in close, trying to shield me, using her body, from whatever might get through. Thankfully, her efforts didn't seem to be necessary as the barrier held strong.

In a matter of seconds, the tarp covering the carriage was torn to shreds and I get a better view of the situation at hand.

We were completely surrounded.

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Just from what I could see, there were at least thirty bandits. Our current situation was unfavorable at best, as both our path forward and our retreat back were blocked off by bandits wielding swords, spears, and other close ranged weapons. On the mountainside to our right, there were archers positioned atop a cliff, their bows aimed at us, while only the steep edge of the mountain with looming fog beckoned to our left.

Jasmine, Durden, and my father seemed to be fine, with no visible injuries, but Helen had an unhealthy pale complexion that seemed to be a result of the arrow jutting from her right calf.

A bald man with multiple scars deforming his face and a body of a bear, carrying a giant battle axe, spoke out. "Look what we have here. Pretty good catch, boys. Leave only the girls and the kid alive. Try not to scar them too much. Damaged goods will only sell for less," he snorted with a smirk that revealed a nearly toothless mouth.

Damaged goods...

I felt my body temperature rising, tensing from a smoldering anger I haven't felt towards someone in a while.

Being sheltered in the bubble of my home had almost made me forget that any world has its own share of trash like him.

I was ready to rush towards this brute, almost forgetting the fact that I was now in a four-year-old's body, when my father yelled out, "There are only 4 mages and none of them seem to be conjurers! The rest are normal warriors!"

Faint mana fluctuations around a person's body made mages distinguishable compared to normal humans, only apparent if studied closely. As for whether they were an augments or conjurer, making an inference based on physical structure and the weapon they were holding gave me a pretty solid idea.

I could visibly see how quickly my father reverted back to his former adventurer days

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when he had once led the Twin Horns as his expression held the wisdom that could only come from experience. He donned his gauntlets, shouting, "Safeguard Formation!"

Adam quickly arrived behind us as he faced the back of the road, spear pointed, while Jasmine and Helen came to our left with both of their weapons unsheathed, facing ahead. My father and Durden faced the mountainside, positioning themselves to protect us from the archers overhead. Meanwhile, Angela maintained her position, preparing another spell as she kept her wind barrier active.

"Gather and guard my allies, O' benevolent Earth; do not let them be harmed!"

[Earth Wall]

The ground rumbled as a four-meter earthen wall transmuted up from the ground, curving up in front of Durden.

Using that moment, my father burst forward, raising his gauntlets in a guard position against the arrows towards the enemy archers.

Moments later, Angela finished her spell and unleashed a torrent of wind blades, aimed at the front and back of the path. That was apparently the cue as Adam and Jasmine shadowed behind the wind spell, arriving in front of our distraught enemies that were covering their vitals against the flurry of blades. Helen remained, her arrow nocked and bow drawn, imbuing the tip with mana that shined in a faint blue light.

It didn't take a genius to realize that this arrangement was ideal for protecting valuable goods or people. With two layers of protection from the conjurers and an archer mage ready to snipe anyone who managed to cross the assaults of Adam, Jasmine, and Father into the defense line, it was a standard, yet, well-thought-out formation.

"Warrior coming your way, Helen!" Adam shouted as he dodged the swing of a mace, delivering a precise swipe to the jugular of the unfortunate bandit. His eyes widened as he dropped his weapon, desperately trying to seal the fatal wound with his trembling hands as blood spurted out through the gaps between his fingers.

Mother was holding me firmly in her bosom as she tried to shield my eyes from the scenes of gore happening around us. Fortunately for me, she wasn't looking down at me, so she didn't realize that I could see fairly clearly.

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Meanwhile, a scruffy, middle-aged man wielding a machete lunged towards Angela, hoping to disrupt the spell. Although the wind blade spell didn't seem all too powerful, it provided a painful distraction that was keeping us on equal footing, despite our lack of numbers.

I tried to free myself to block the man before he got in range to attack Angela, but before I could pull myself away from my mother, it was already over.

The fierce sound of the shot came only after the arrow had done its job. Helen's shot had carried a force powerful enough to pierce through the armored chest of the machete-wielding bandit and lift him up and back a half-dozen meters, nailing him into the ground.

I took a brief moment to take a mental note: wise men ought not to piss off Helen.

Helen's eyes narrowed as she nocked and drew another arrow. Focusing, I could faintly see the mana gathering into her right eye as she shut her left. Soon, another reinforced arrow streaked through, followed by a sharp hiss, ignoring all opposing air resistance as it closed in on another enemy fighter.

This man vaguely resembled a smaller Durden, except more muscular and with more angular of a face. His brows furrowing in concentration, his giant sword, which was his height, had somehow reached the arrow in time, generating the sound of a bullet hitting metal. The enemy fighter slid back, but wasn't harmed as he anchored his greatsword into the ground, using it to balance himself. However, before he even had the chance to smirk in content, a second arrow pierced through his forehead. It was a grim sight, seeing the light drain from his eyes.

Jasmine was engaged in an intense duel against an augments, whose weapon was a long chain whip. It looked like Jasmine was at a disadvantage since the range of her two daggers was lacking. She was doing all she could to dodge the erratic movements of the whip.

By now, it was evident that the enemy had realized how much she was struggling as he jeered while licking his lips. "I'll make sure to treat you real well before we sell you off as a slave, little missy. Don't worry. By the time I'm done training you, you'll be begging to stay with me," he hissed, followed by another lick of his lips.

The very thought made me shudder, but, at this point, all I could do was clench my

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fists in frustration. Against a fighter, I had a chance. Against an adult augmenter? I didn't have the confidence in winning.

It pained me to stay in the protection of everyone while they risked their lives. I tried to come up with ways to help, but, so far, none came to mind. I could only grit my teeth and endure.

Surveying the battle, I saw that the earth wall was holding strong, none of the arrows being able to penetrate through. Focusing on Durden, I watched his left hand that was directed towards the earth wall as he maintained a constant flow of mana to keep it from collapsing. He formed a narrow slit in the middle of the wall to gain vision on my father and the archers scattering, trying to run away.

"Take heed, Mother Earth, and answer my call. Pierce my enemies. Let none of them live."

[Rupture Spike]

After a brief delay, a dozen spikes began shooting up from the ground at the bandit archers. While a few managed to dodge, many of the bandits were impaled, their screams only lasting a couple of moments before dying.

Durden looked recognizably drained from that spell; his jaw clenched as beads of sweat ran down his pale face...

It was at this moment that I noticed my mother had taken out a wand. Her trembling fingers were fumbling with it before she shook her head and stuffed it back into her robe. In the wand's stead, she held onto me tighter.

There was no one from our side injured besides Helen, who had bound the wound on her calf. Fortunately, the arrow wasn't lodged in too deep, thanks to Helen's mana reinforcement; by the time she wound it, the bleeding had stopped, but throughout this whole time, my mother had a constant look of paranoia, her face pale with worry.

I couldn't help but notice that her hand kept reaching for the wand in her robe until she decided to draw it back, last minute. Her eyes never stayed fixed to one place, always turning left and right, trying to look out for anything that could harm us.

While a little confused at first, I dismissed it, mentally concluding that, since she hadn't been an adventurer for too long, unlike my father, she was simply not used to situations like this.

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The battle was coming to its peak. The bandit group had not suspected that every one of our group members would be a capable mage. Because of that calculation error, all of the melee fighters were dead, the only ones alive being the four mages and a couple of scattered archers on the run.

Jasmine was still having trouble with the perverted chain user, but the arrogance on his face was wiped clean by this time, with a couple of nicks and cuts on his body dripping blood.

Adam was engaged with a dual-sworded augments. His fighting style reminded me of a snake, with his flexible maneuvers and sudden attacks.

He should be considered one of the rare elemental augments with a water-attribute style.

Reinforcing the shaft of his spear to be flexible, his attacks were a mirage of quick thrusts and fluid swipes. The battle looked to be in his favor; the dual wielder had wounds that were profusely bleeding as he desperately tried to parry the onslaught of attacks.

A thundering crash shifted my attention away from Adam's battle. My father had been knocked down against the debris of what was now left of the [Earth Wall] spell and was struggling to pick himself up as blood dribbled down from the side of his lips.

"Dad!!"

"Honey!"

I rushed out of the wind barrier, kneeling in front of Father, my mother following immediately behind. I could see the panic written on her face as she nervously contemplated what she could do.

I didn't know why she wasn't healing him—maybe because she was so startled—but just when I was about to suggest it, my father cut me off.

"Cough! Alice, listen to me. Don't worry about me. If you use a healing spell right now, they'll realize what you are and try that much harder to capture you. They'll be willing to sacrifice a lot more if they know!" he stressed, his voice in a low whisper.

After a brief, trembling hesitation, my mother took out her wand and began chanting.

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I would've assumed that her stammered chanting was caused by seeing her husband injured, but for some reason, it felt like she was almost... afraid of using her magic.

Father turned to me after giving up trying to persuade his wife.

"Art, listen carefully. After the healing spell activates, they're going to try to capture your mother at all costs. After I'm healed enough, I'm going to engage the leader and try to buy more time. I think I can beat him, but not if

I have to worry about protecting you guys. Take your mother back down the road and don't stop; Adam will open up a path for you."

"No dad! I'm staying with you. I can fight! You saw me! I can help!"
Consideration for being mature eluded me. It seemed like at this moment, I was really acting like the four-year-old I was on the outside, but I didn't care. I wasn't going to leave behind my family whom I've grown to love and friends who I've bonded with so much this past week and a half.

"LISTEN TO ME, ARTHUR LEYWIN!" Father agonizingly roared. This was the first time hearing his voice like this; the kind of voice that one would only use for desperate measures.

"I know you can fight! That's why I'm entrusting your mother to you. Protect her and protect the baby inside her. I'll catch up to you after this is over."

His words shook my mind like thunder.

Protect her and protect the baby inside her...

Suddenly, everything clicked. Why she was acting so paranoid. Why she was clutching me and making sure nothing got even close to us. Why both Durden and Angela were guarding us with defensive spells, instead of just one of them.

My mother was pregnant.

"I was planning on telling you when we arrived in Xyrus, but..." Not finishing his sentence, father just looked at me sheepishly, still pale from the blow he received from the bald, axe-wielding boss.

"Okay, I'll protect Mom."

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"Atta boy. That's my son."

My mother finished her chant at this time and both she and my father glowed in a bright golden-white light.

“Sonova— One of them’s a healer! Don’t let her get away!” the leader roared.

I quickly grabbed my mother’s arm with both hands and tugged at her to move while reinforcing myself with mana.

We reached the area Adam and the dual-wielder were battling a dozen meters down the road.

“Art, hurry down, I got him!” Adam barked as he kept his opponent at bay.

The dual-wielder was obviously frustrated by the inability to neither reach me nor mother because of Adam. We hurried down the slope when I heard a faint *wizz*

sound to our left. Acting on instinct, I jumped up, bringing my wooden sword up and reinforcing my whole body and the sword to withstand the blow of the incoming arrow.

A splintering crack resonated as the arrow met the wooden sword. Fortunately, the arrow wasn’t reinforced with any mana so, even though the force pushed me back, I was able to regain balance midair by using the force of the shot, rotating my body and redirecting the arrow away. I landed on my feet a bit less impressively than I wanted to, throwing away what was left of my wooden sword.

“What the— Ugh!”

...Was all I heard from the assailant before he was promptly impaled by an arrow fired by Helen.

“GO!” she exclaimed, nocking in another arrow and firing it at the leader of the bandits to support my father.

That was weird.

Currently, Jasmine, Adam, and my father, along with Helen, were each fighting a mage.

Wasn't there four?

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"Damien! Forget the plan, don't let them live!" the leader barked out.

Who was he commanding?

"...respond to my call and wash all to oblivion!" a faint voice finished chanting.

[Water Cannon]

From the mountainside, one of the scattered "archers" had his hands brought together, aimed at me and mother. We were tricked. He had camouflaged himself during the chaos. He wasn't an archer or even an augments. He was a conjurer!

Shit!

I didn't have much time to react as a huge sphere of pressurized water, at least three meters in diameter, shot towards us, increasing in size as it neared.

My mind raced, trying to come up with options.

To my immediate right was my mother, and to my left were Adam and his opponent not far off; and behind me, of course, was the edge of the mountain. Even if I could dodge this, mother wouldn't be able to and she'd be forced off the ledge of the mountain.

What should I do?

"Dammit!" I let out a roar unfit for a four-year-old!

Willing all of the remaining mana left in this cursed body, I tackled my mother, propelling both of us out of the way.

I quickly realized my forty-pound body didn't carry enough momentum to push both of us out of range of the water cannon.

No choice!

If I was going down, I was going to make sure to take that bastard down with me!

I channeled mana into my arms and pushed my mother farther down, out of range. In that moment, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion as my mother's eyes

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slowly widened in panic and disbelief. She might get a pretty bad bruise from the push, but minor bodily injuries were the least of my problems at that moment. If she didn't want to get hit with another spell, I had to get rid of this conjurer.

Unsheathing the knife Jasmine gave me from my waist, I imbued it with mana. What I was trying to do I had only done with ki in my old world, never with mana.

After willing mana into the knife, I threw it like a boomerang, aiming it at the conjurer, who was still concentrating on the water cannon. Barely curving around the edge of the giant cannonball of water, I heard the firm thud of the knife meeting skin.

The mage let out a shrill howl of pain followed by a string of curses, indicating that the mage wasn't dead.

Losing concentration, the mage's water cannon lost shape, but unfortunately, there was still a surge of water strong enough to push me off

the cliff.

Time for plan B.

Plan B was just in case my initial throw couldn't kill him. I managed to succeed in the gamble of Plan B, and that was creating a thin string of mana attached to the knife, currently engorged somewhere in the conjurer's body, to my hand.

I tugged back on the mana string just as the spell rammed against my body like a brick wall, knocking every ounce of air I had in my lungs and most likely breaking my ribs.

Like a fish caught on the line, I could hear the mage's scream over the gushing tide of water as he was helplessly dragged down with me by the force of his own spell.

Even as my vision began darkening, I was able to see the battle coming to an end.

Father and Helen had just managed to kill the leader. Angela, providing Jasmine with backup, allowed them to put the whip-user on his last stand. Meanwhile, I spotted Durden as he was desperately conjuring a spell in order to save me, but I knew it was too late; the spell had knocked me too far away.

Still, I was comforted in the fact that everyone would be okay. Maybe the only thing I would regret was being unable to see my baby sibling.

With that, I felt the cold grip of sleep steal me away.

Damn... I had always wanted to be an older brother.

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The blurred sight of a familiar setting made me blink a few times to reconfirm that what I was seeing wasn't a dream. From the looks of it, I seemed to be back in my old body. Getting up from the couch that I was sitting on, I left my room in the castle. A young maid, who had been waiting for me just outside, greeted me respectfully, immediately on sight.

"G-good morning King Grey."

I didn't even bother glancing towards her direction, walking as she followed a couple meters away.

Reaching the courtyard where all of the trainees were lined up with swords held in front of them, I turned my attention to the instructors yelling at them about proper stance and breathing. When one of them saw me, he immediately turned and gave a firm military salute, with the other instructors and trainees following suit.

I simply motioned for them to continue before continuing. Reaching my destination, I pushed open the double doors, arriving in front of an aged man with a head of thick white hair that matched his long beard, and emerald eyes that shined with a sense of cunning wisdom and knowledge. He was the head of The Council, Marlorn.

While I held the position of "King," I couldn't help but consider myself as just a glorified soldier. The ones who actually governed the country, managing the politics and economy, was The Council.

So what came of my position as King?

The title of King meant that I was actually more of a one-man army. Due to the decreasing numbers of children born and limited amount of resources, The Councils of each country assembled and, after countless months of discussion and arguments, came to the conclusion that if wars continued to exist, we would eventually wipe ourselves out.

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Getting rid of war would lead to two major outcomes: decrease in the death count, leading to population growth, and a decrease in destroyed harvestable land and resources from the result of nuclear arms. The solution that they came up with and enacted was to replace wars with a different form of combat.

What replaced wars became known as the Paragon Duels. Whenever there was a dispute on a level that impacted the state of the country, a Paragon Duel would be declared, with each country sending in a representative that they deemed was the strongest.

Looking up, Marlorn exclaimed with the standard fake, picturesque smile that seemed to be an inborn trait amongst politicians, “King Grey! What brings you to my humble dwelling?”

“I’m retiring.”

Without even giving him the chance to react, I unclipped my badge, a piece of metal so sought after by every practitioner, and slammed it on his giant Oakwood desk, walking out the door.

What have I been living for all these years? I was an orphan who had been brought up in a camp designed to raise duelers. I was twenty-eight, yet I’ve never dated, never loved. I’ve spent my whole life until now solely for the sake of being the strongest.

And for what...?

Admiration? Money? Glory?

I had all of that, but never in a million years would I choose to have that over what I had in the town of Ashber.

I missed Alice. I missed Reynolds. I missed Durden. I missed Jasmine. I missed Helen.

I missed Angela. I even missed Adam.

...Mother...

...Father...

“COUGH!! COUGH!”

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I opened my eyes again, with towering trees and dangling vines filling my vision as I lay on my back. However, this time, the excruciating pain that I was welcomed with told me I wasn't dreaming.

Where was I?

How was I alive?

I tried getting up, but my body didn't listen. The only thing I was able to manage was turning my head, and even that involved a series of throbbing pains in my neck.

Looking to my right, I spotted my knapsack. I slowly turned my head to my left, gritting my teeth through the pain.

My eyes widened at the sight and I immediately had to resist the urge to vomit. To my left was what was left of the conjurer I had dragged down with me. A pool of blood surrounded the corpse, whose body probably had more broken bones than ones still intact. I could see the white bones of his ribs jutting out of the sunken cavity of the chest with a pile of his entrails beside him. His limbs were sprawled out at unnatural angles, with the mage's skull shattered in the back with some brain matter oozing out along with blood.

His face was frozen into an expression of surprise and disbelief, except for his completely red eyes, as a trail of dried blood was still visible from his eye sockets. I couldn't turn my head away fast enough. With my already weakened body being assaulted with both the gruesome sight and repugnant smell, I vomited what was left in my stomach until I was left gagging dry heaves.

Even in my past life, I had never come across such a badly mangled corpse. With the nauseating stench and insects feasting on the gore, I couldn't help but feel sick. With parts of my face and neck covered in my own regurgitation, I finally managed to turn my head to rid my sight of the mage's grotesque remains.

How was I still alive?

I couldn't help wondering what had happened while I was unconscious. Clearly, the mage was alive up until the landing... so what happened to me?

I should look very similar to this corpse right about now, maybe even worse, but not only was I okay, I didn't even seem to have a broken bone.

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I pondered over the possible answers until I was interrupted by a strong grumble from my stomach.

Again, I tried getting up, fighting through my body's protests; the only parts of my body that seem to be listening to me as of now was my right arm and my neck up. I willed mana into my right arm and used my fingers to claw my way, dragging my body, to reach my knapsack. It couldn't have been more than a meter away, but it took over what felt like an hour until I finally managed to reach it. Pulling it closer to me, I rummaged through it with my only able hand until I found what I was looking for: the dried berries and nuts my mother had packed!

I succeeded in pouring a mouthful of the snack that I brought only because of my mother's insistence. My throat, surprised by the sudden flood of food, responded by leaving me in a choking fit of coughs, leading me to another round of agony in my body.

Fumbling for the water sack inside my knapsack, I slowly poured a bit of the water into my mouth before placing another handful of the snack into my mouth. Tears rolling down the sides of my face and into my ears. I

continued chewing on the dried rations until passing out again, using my knapsack as a makeshift blanket.

My eyes fluttered open as I stirred awake from the brisk bite of cold. Looking around, the position of the first rays of light peeking through the mountains told me it was dawn.

This time, I was able to get up, but only with the help of mana. I carefully inspected all of my body, making sure everything was in place before allowing myself to relax.

First thing's first. I made my way to the corpse of the mage while trying to avoid looking at the heinous injuries that caused his demise. Spotting the knife I was looking for, I quickly jerked it out of his thigh.

I wasn't sure how long I would have to be here, so having a weapon was critical.

‘Oh, you’re awake.’

I instantly got into a fighting stance, gritting through the pain from the sudden movement, with my knife in hand, turning to face the carcass.

I swear to God, if this corpse is the one that’s talking...

A melodic chuckle made me look around for the source of the voice.

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‘Do not worry. You won’t have to worry about that corpse reanimating.’

The voice that seemed to come out of nowhere had a dignified, yet soft quality emanating a sense of royalty. It was a powerful and resonant, yet silky and soothing sound that made you want to trust it.

Still on guard, I managed to mutter a less than elegant response.

“Who are you? Are you the one that saved me?”

‘Yes, to your second question. As for the first, you will soon find out when you arrive at my dwelling.’

This voice seemed awfully sure that I would try and find it.

As if reading my thoughts, she continued, ‘I am the only one that will be able to get you home from this place, so I advise you to make haste.’

That jerked some sense into me. That’s right! I had to get back home! Mother! Father!

The Twin Horns! My baby sibling! Are they alright? Did they reach Xyrus safely?

If the voice could really take me back home, I had no choice but to find it.

“Ahem, dear uhh... Mr. Voice? May I ask for the directions to your location so that you may bless me with your presence?”

The voice let out another soft chuckle before replying with, ‘Don’t you think it’s a little rude to call a lady ‘Mister’? And yes, I’ll show you the way.’

Ahh... so it was a lady.

Immediately, my vision shifted into a bird’s-eye view. Zooming out, a location that was roughly around a day’s trip to the east came into sight and lit up before my vision shifted back to normal.

‘I recommend departing immediately. It will be a lot safer traveling during the day than when it gets dark,’ gently chided the voice.

“Yes Ma’am!” I quickly picked up my knapsack before trotting towards my destination.

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It became less painful with each step and, by mid-morning, I was only left with a few aches here and there. Whatever that lady did was some powerful magic. I've never heard or read of casting a spell with that much of a distance. Or maybe she left after casting the spell right before I landed? Then how could she have known that we were falling, and why did she only save me? The more I tried to solve the mystery, the more questions I seemed to end up with.

Hearing a faint gurgling sound, I headed towards the direction, spotting a narrow stream.

“Yes!” I exclaimed.

I was absolutely filthy. My face and neck still had the stench of stomach acid, while my clothes were torn and caked with grime. Almost sprinting, I cannonballed into the stream, vigorously scrubbing clean my face and body. Taking off my clothes and after briefly washing them, I laid them down on a nearby rock to dry. After finishing the refreshing bath, I walked towards my still damp clothes when...

‘Kukuku... how pleasantly carefree.’

Reflexively, both my hands shot down to cover my precious area as I hunched my back, trying to make my body as small as possible.

‘Don’t worry, there wasn’t much to see.’ I shuddered as I almost felt the Voice wink at me.

How rude! My pride...

Grumbling, I almost wanted to argue that my body wasn’t developed, but I chose to ignore the Voice and put on my clothes.

‘Aww... don’t pout. I apologize,’ the Voice stifled a laugh.

Calm your mind, Arthur. A king must be calm...

After I put on my clothes, the perverted voice seemed to go silent. Not minding too much, I rummaged through my bag and dug out the last of my dried rations. Water wasn't going to be a problem for a while since I had just refilled my water sack, but I would need food soon; hopefully, the voice would provide me with something.

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Looking around, I begin wondering where I was. Since I fell off the mountain towards the east, I must be near the elves' domain. I didn't think I was in the Forest of Elshire because I wasn't surrounded by fog. Was I in the Beast Glades? No. There weren't any mana beasts... I spotted a few rabbits and birds, but I'd yet to see anything else.

Something even stranger that I noticed a bit before was the abundance of mana in this place. It was mostly due to the richness of mana that I was able to recover from my initial state so quickly. Although that still didn't explain how I survived in the first place, I hoped that the source behind the voice would tell me.

I should hurry.

Aside from the fact that there was no road, it turned out to be a pretty uneventfully peaceful trip, with minimal obstacles and terrain I had to go around. As I drew near the location of the voice, the density in mana was getting richer and thicker. Ignoring the temptation to stop and absorb the surrounding mana, I ventured on. Training wasn't important right now. I needed to get home.

Since everyone probably assumed that I was dead, I couldn't help but worry about Mother and Father. Not so much physically, but for their mental health. I'm concerned Mother and Father wouldn't forgive themselves for my death. The only thought that comforted me was the fact that my mother was pregnant. Yes. At least for the sake of my unborn brother or sister, they'd stay strong.

I reached the area where the Voice directed me towards, but I was unable to see anything besides a cluster of rocks surrounded by a cluster of trees.

‘I’m glad you were able to make it here safely,’ the Voice echoed confidently, as if it already knew I would.

“Nice to meet you uhh... Ma’am? Miss Rocks?”

‘I’m not a rock, nor a cluster of them. There is a crevice between the back of the adjacent rocks. That’s where I’ll be,’ the Voice chuckled.

Looking around, I managed to spot the small gap, about the width of an adult, between two of the larger rocks that were leaning against each other. The slight breeze coming out from the crevice told me I had found what I was looking for. If it weren’t for the Voice directing me to this exact location, I would never have even noticed the small fissure.

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‘Child. Go on and enter through the crevice, but strengthen yourself with mana before you do.’

I can finally meet Mother and Father soon!

Without a second’s hesitation, I slipped in through the gap easily while willing the mana to strengthen my body.

I had expected a platform to step on but instead, I immediately plummeted down the dark hole.

The voice had failed to warn me that I was going to be doing a vertical fall.

‘I guess that was why she mentioned using mana to me’ was the thought that ran through my head as I descended, screaming at the top of my four-year-old lungs.

Rubbing my butt, groaning, I slowly supported myself up.

“We finally meet, child.”

I felt the blood drain from my face as my mouth gaped open and eyes bulged. Feeling lightheaded as my legs failed to support me, I crumbled back onto my aching butt, staring at the one who’s been helping me this whole time.

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“W-What are you?” I managed to stammer out.

Despite having lived two lives, what my eyes saw, my brain refused to believe. A monster, for a lack of a better word, which easily towered over ten meters high, was seated cross-legged, on a crudely carved throne of jagged stone with an arm lazily supporting its head. Its petrifying red eyes that gazed down at me, while menacing, carried an oddly tranquil quality. Two massive horns protruded out of the sides of its head and arched down and around its skull, curving up to a point near the front, reminding me of something almost akin to a crown. It had a mouth with two fangs peeking out of its lips and while its body was adorned in a sleek black armor that had neither decorations nor embellishments, it still glowed with the quality of a priceless treasure.

Reiterating the fact that I was once a king, still, this being that stood before me now made me embarrassed of even having the nerve to call myself one. No, the one sitting on that giant throne was a being that would make even the most unfaithful heretics bow down in submission.

Yet here it was, in all its glory... with its head resting on its arm, while its other hand nonchalantly scratched its nose.

What I had failed to notice until now, though, because of the dim lighting in the cave and its body being completely black, was that this being had a

gaping hole in the side of its chest, blood continuously oozing out.

“We finally meet,” it repeated with a lazy half-smile that revealed a row of pointed teeth.

I tried getting up, but failed halfway and end up back on my butt, my face still slack from the shock of what my eyes were seeing.

“Bugs will fly into your mouth if you keep it open that wide.”

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Great. At least it has a sense of humor.

“As for what I am, I won’t say anything more than what you can see from looking,” the horned humanoid monster said with its eyes seeming to gaze straight through me.

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“It is going to take a while for me to open a dimensional rift that will transport you to your house, so until then, just be patient and wait here. There are special roots that grow here. You will be able to live off those until I finish,” it sighed.

That’s right. That’s what I was here to do. I managed to regain a bit of my composure and I stood up, walking a little closer to the being.

Giving a courteous bow, I replied, “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me and what you will do. If there is any way I can repay you, I will do for you whatever is in my power.”

“Such good manners for a child. Do not worry; I am expecting neither a favor nor your gratitude. I am simply doing this for my own amusement. Come! Sit here, closer to me, and keep me company. I haven’t talked to anyone in a while,” the being laughed, patting an area of its throne for me to sit on.

I climbed up the platform rather awkwardly, forgetting to use mana to just jump up, and propped myself on the throne next to the being.

“Uhh... excuse me for being rude, but you don’t exactly look like a lady. How should I exactly address you?” I said, making eye contact with the being.

“You’re right. I don’t exactly look like a lady, now do I? I wonder why I said that. My name is Sylvia,” she replied, letting out a soft chuckle.

This giant demon lord-like monster looked like anything but a Sylvia to me, but I chose to keep that to myself.

“Elder Sylvia, do you mind if I ask a few questions?”

“Go ahead young one, although I may not be able to answer everything.”

I immediately rattled off all of the questions that had been on my mind ever since

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waking up and after meeting Sylvia. “Where is this place? Why were you here all alone?

Where did you come from? Why do you have that huge wound?... Why did you save me?”

She patiently waited for me to finish before replying.

“You must have had a lot on your mind. The first question is easy to answer. This place is a narrow zone between the Beast Glades and the Forest of Elshire. No one knows of this place because I’ve been warding off anyone who came close, although the cases are rare in the first place. You, young child, are the first to enter into this domain,” she easily explained.

“Please call me Art! My name is Arthur Leywin but everyone calls me Art! You can, too!” I blurted out before shutting my mouth with my hands, confused as to why I was acting like an excited child.

“Kukuku... Very well child, I will call you Art!” Her red eyes glazed, looking afar while answering my next questions.

“Continuing on to your second question. I am here alone simply because I have no one left to be with. While I do not think telling you everything would be wise, I will tell you that I have many enemies that desperately wish for something that I have; my last battle with my enemies left this wound. As for where I come from... very far away, haha.”

There was a moment of pause before Sylvia continued on, this time her eyes looking straight at me, almost studying me.

“As for why I saved you... even I do not fully know the answer to that question. Perhaps I have been alone for far too long and I simply wished to have someone to talk to. I first noticed you when your party was engaged in battle with the bandits. When you fell off the cliff to save your mother, I felt compelled to save you, thinking it was a waste for such a good child to die. You are very brave. It is rare for even an adult to be able to do that.”

I shook my head. “I was scared too, and I didn’t have much of an option. I just wanted to save my mother and my baby sibling inside her.” I didn’t know if it was from the gentle way she talked or because of how big and powerful she seemed, but in front of her, I seemed to turn into a child. No, I was a child in front of her.

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“I see... Your mother was pregnant. You must miss them dearly. Rest assured, your family and party are safe. As for where they have gone, my sight cannot reach far enough to tell anymore.”

“ ... ”

A wave of relief washed over me as I had to do my utmost to keep tears from falling.

I see, they're safe. This new life brought about emotions I'd thought I'd never experienced in my previous life.

"Thank God. Th-they're alive... they're okay..." I let out snuffle.

Sylvia's giant hand reached down as she softly patted my head with a finger.

The day passed by with me conversing with Sylvia, picking up some roots in between to eat that looked and tasted very similar to potatoes but were black in color.

We talked about all sorts of things to pass the time as she prepared to open a portal.

At one point, she asked me how I was able to use mana so well at my age.

"I was under the impression that amongst humans, the earliest mage to have awakened so far was the age of ten, and even then, because the child couldn't grasp how to use it, there was very little he could do with it. Yet, not only have you already formed your mana core, but, by the way you use your mana, you seem to be more efficient than a lot of full-fledged mages."

I just shrugged, feeling oddly proud by her compliment. "My parents said I was a genius or something. I can read really well and I get what the pictures and words in the books are saying."

A few more days trickled by as Sylvia continued preparing the portal.

In a regretful tone, she explained one day, "The spell will take some time in order for it to be completely safe. I do not wish for you to land in a destination you are not familiar with. Even one inconsistency can lead to you being transported a couple hundred meters off the ground. Please be patient; you will be able to see your loved ones soon."

I nodded and said that as long as I knew they're alive, I was fine with waiting. It beat

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trying to climb back up the edge of the mountain.

These past couple of days, while I trained my mana core and chatted with Sylvia, I noticed a few things.

Sylvia really made me think of the cliché, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Contrary to her intimidating appearance, she was kind, gentle, patient, and warm. She reminded me of my mother, in the way that they both scolded me while being tender when I did something wrong. I mentioned how the mage that I fought, as well as the other bandits, deserved worse deaths than they had when she suddenly flicked my forehead...

Even though she was gentle, a flick of a finger from someone over ten meters high was nothing to make light of. I was sent tumbling on the ground before angrily spouting,

"What was that for?"

Picking me up and setting me on her armored knee, she said in a soft but pained tone,

"Art. Perhaps you are not wrong in that those bandits did deserve death; even I chose not to save that mage you fell with for the same reasons. However, do not let your heart be clouded with continuous thoughts of hatred and the sort. Continue on proudly with your life and gain the strength to protect your loved ones from harm. Along the way, you will come to face situations like before, maybe even worse, but don't let the grief and rage corrode your heart. Move on and learn to better yourself from those experiences so it won't happen again."

I blinked, a bit stunned by the fact that I was being lectured on morals by someone that looked like the epitome of evil herself. Strangely, it stuck to me as I just responded with a blank nod.

Another thing I noticed was that her wound seemed to be getting bigger. At first, I found it somewhat odd that she could still be alive with a gaping hole on the side of her chest, but I grew numb to it. That is... until a couple days ago, I noticed the wound seemed to be bleeding a more profusely. Sylvia tried to hide it at first with her hand, but it was growing more and more obvious.

Noticing my concerned gaze towards the wound, Sylvia gave me a weak smile and said,

“Do not worry, little one. This wound festers from time to time.”

One day, as I was meditating and using strict movement techniques to better control

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my mana, Sylvia suddenly interrupted, “Art. Try absorbing mana while you are making movements. Ideally, you should be able to absorb at least a fraction of the mana you would during meditation while you are fighting. Although you would be spending mana faster than you can absorb mana, you will be able to prolong the usage of your mana.”

That brought about memories of me thinking about this exact idea. I had forgotten about testing my hypothesis since I wasn’t able to move as freely as I could now. I was so used to having absorption of mana and the manipulation of mana as two separate things that I hadn’t stopped to think about the possibilities in this new world.

“Let me try,” I nodded.

“Humans have a very linear mindset in regards to mana and find it hard to deviate from anything that already works. Practice hard now, though, because you can only acquire this skill while both your body and mana core are immature. Even mana beasts learn to do this naturally, but humans awaken much too late and in most cases, their bodies are not adept for this ability when they first awaken. Considering you are so young, there shouldn’t be a problem if you practice,” continued Sylvia with a proud puff of her nose.

I had to admit that, like testing most theories, it was extremely difficult at first. It reminded me of the exercises my caretaker at the orphanage had shown us when I was younger, the ones where you tried to make each of your arms do something different... except much harder.

Practicing this essentially meant being able to fight proficiently while still maintaining a constant inward flow of mana. Sylvia’s only advice was that, according to her, an exceptional mage must be able to split his thinking mind into multiple segments in order to process information at an efficient speed. While I’ve never had a teacher tell me to split my mind, I tried doing as she said. Needless to say, I had never tripped over my own body so many times in this and my previous life combined.

This, at least, seemed to get a few hearty chuckles of amusement out of Sylvia.

Two months had passed since then as I kept Sylvia company with stories of my family and the town I was born in, while continuing to improve in the technique thanks to Sylvia’s patience and my diligence.

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Sylvia refused to tell me the name of this skill, so I named it myself: Mana Rotation.

Over this period of time, it would be an understatement to say I’d merely gotten close to Sylvia. She had treated me like her own blood grandson and,

in response, I'd grown attached to this demon lord grandmother. It was because of our growing relationship that I wasn't able to simply ignore what was happening.

It was frustratingly clear that her wound was growing worse as the portal responsible for taking me home was becoming more distinct.

"Sylvia, please tell me, what's happening to your wound? Why is it getting worse? It wasn't like this before! You saying it was only a fester every now and then was clearly a lie! This isn't going to go away on its own, it's actually getting worse!" I frustratingly voiced my concern one especially bad night after she had vomited a pool of blood.

I paused for a second, struck with realization...

Why didn't I notice this before?

She had been getting worse while creating the portal.

In order to send me home...

She was sacrificing her life so I could meet my family.

Sylvia let out a deep breath, knowing that I had realized what was going on. Managing a sheepish smile, Sylvia whispered, "Art. Yes, I am dying. But I will get angry if you blame yourself, thinking that you are causing this. I have been dying for quite a while now. You are doing me a favor by allowing me to leave this forsaken cave a bit faster."

As soon as she finished speaking, a bright, golden glow radiated out of her body.

Shielding my eyes from going blind, I tried to focus on the shape forming from where Sylvia once sat. In place of the ten-meter titan-like figure was a dragon even larger.

From her snout to the end of her tail, she was clad in a pearl white coat of shimmering scales. Beneath her iridescent lavender eyes were glowing

golden runes that marked her neck and ran down to spread around her body and tail like sacred engravings.

These markings reminded me of a very elegant, almost celestial, tribal pattern, branching out harmoniously and with purpose, like carefully-placed vines. The dragon's wings were pure white, adorned with white-bladed feathers so fine and sharp that they could put swords forged by master smiths to shame.

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The golden light enveloping the dragon dimmed until it fully replaced the once titan-shaped being.

"There now... Do I look a bit more like a Sylvia?" Sylvia let out a toothy smirk.

"S-Sylvia?? Y-you're a dragon?" I said.

"Now That I am in this form, we do not have much time. Yes, I am something you humans refer to us as 'a dragon.' The reason I am dying is because I had been inflicted with this wound after narrowly escaping from my captors. I had sensed one of them approaching dangerously close a few days ago, so I feel that my time of hiding is drawing to an end. This form will alert them of my location, which is why I only have time to explain what is necessary. I am giving you this to take care of from now on."

One of her bladed wings unfolded and revealed a translucent, rainbow-colored stone the size of two fists. With a myriad of colors and shades, this stone resonated an aura that made me hesitate in holding it, as if I wasn't worthy.

Without waiting for me to respond, she continued, "Everything will reveal itself when the time comes, so just hold onto this and do not let anyone know that you have this.

Most will not know what it is but everyone will be attracted by the aura it emits.”

Sylvia then proceeded to pluck a feather from her wings with her claw and hand it to me. “Wrap the stone in this to conceal it.”

After doing as told, the once divine radiant stone merely appeared to be a smooth white rock— pretty, but ordinary.

While I was studying the feather-encased stone, I was suddenly pushed back as Sylvia’s snout gently brushed against my chest where my mana core was.

Taken aback, I looked up to see Sylvia’s purple eyes and the gold markings blaze brighter than they had when she first transformed. As the markings grew dimmer and then disappeared, Sylvia pierced her tongue into my core and wisped out a golden smoke that crackled in sparks of purple.

A sharp yelp escaped my mouth as I blinked, confused and surprised. I continued to just stare at her as she moved her head back, leaving a trail of blood from a hole in my worn-down shirt. My sternum bled, but when I ran my hand through the area, there was no wound.

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Sylvia’s expression had grown visibly pained and weak; it was apparent even for a mighty dragon that was even bigger than her previous illusion. What caught my attention, though, was that her once shimmering purple irises were now just a dim yellow with the beautiful runes that flowed across her face and body now gone.

Before I had the chance to ask what she had done, a giant explosion interrupted me.

I whipped my head up to see that the ceiling of the cave had been blown off and what came into vision was a figure that reminded me of Sylvia’s

previous form.

Clad in sleek black armor and a blood red cape that matched its eyes, the figure's pale grey skin matched the clouded sky in the background. The horns were different, though, as this entity had two horns that curled down and under its ears, lining its chin.

Sylvia immediately covered me with one of her wings in time to protect me from the falling debris and probably keep me hidden from our visitor.

“Lady Sylvia! I advise you to stop your stubbornness and hand it over. You’ve already caused us quite the trouble after hiding yourself! If you submit, the Lord may even heal your wound,” the entity reasoned impatiently.

Immediately after he had finished speaking, the world around me seemed to pause.

Everything but Sylvia and myself, the colors of the world were as though it was being seen through an inverted lens. What surprised me the most was that everything was still. The entity, the clouds behind him, and even the falling debris of the ceiling.

Ignoring the enemy, Sylvie casually peeked underneath her wing. “I’ll open the portal now. I didn’t have the time to make it go directly to your home but it should take you to a place with humans nearby. Do not let him see you and do not look back,” she whispered, her eyes solemn.

I ignored Sylvia’s instructions after I heard what the entity had promised. “Sylvia! Is what he said true? If you turn yourself over, will you be able to live?”

“Do not trust his honey-coated words. It will be worse off for you if you are found right now. As for me, I would rather die than go back to where he is,” Sylvia said, impatience and anger mixed in her voice.

“No! I won’t let you die here. If you refuse to go with him, then please, just come with

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me!" I begged.

"Unfortunately, I cannot go with you. You will forever be in danger if any one of them finds out you have had contact with me. I need to stay here."

Sylvia gently wiped my cheeks with a claw, her draconic eyes lined with what I saw as tears.

"You asked me once, why I chose to save you. The truth was to satisfy my own greed. I wanted to keep you as my own child, even for just a little bit. I intentionally prolonged the transportation spell because I wished to spend more time with you, but it seems I didn't even have the chance to finish it. I'm sorry, little Art, for my selfishness, but I have one last request to make... can you be my grandson and call me grandmother just this once?"

"NOO! I don't care about all of that! I'll say it as much as you want if you come with me!

Grandma! Grandma! You can't!... I-I-I... Please, I'm begging you, just come with me. I-I don't know what you did but everything is frozen right now; we can escape! Please, Grandmother, don't go. Not like this!" I held onto Sylvia's claw, desperately trying to pull her away with me.

In my last moment with her, Sylvia's face blossomed into such a beautiful smile that I swear I thought I saw a human.

I could barely make out the words she said, before she pushed me into the portal.

"Thank you my child."

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The trip through the dimensional rift invoked a very peculiar sensation. It felt as if I was trapped in the middle of a fast-forwarded movie scene. My surroundings were whizzing by in an indistinct blur of colors as I sat on my ass, staring blankly off in the distance with no more tears left to cry.

The ground I landed on cushioned my fall with a pile of leaves and vines. It didn't matter, though. Even if I landed on jagged rocks, I probably wouldn't have noticed.

I remained in the same, seated position I was in during the trip, not even bothering to take in my surroundings.

She was gone.

I would never have the chance to see her again.

Those two thoughts triggered another wave of emotions as I heaved out dry sobs.

I began recalling the near four months we had spent together; how caring she was, treating me like her own blood. I didn't care that she had prolonged sending me home so that I would stay with her. Through the short time I had been with Sylvia, she had taught me so much and given me insight that I had been lacking since coming to this world.

Succumbing to the faculty of my mind that desired sleep in order to cope with the pain, I curled up into a ball where I landed when a searing pain propped me back up.

The burning sensation spread from my mana core throughout my body until a voice echoed in my head.

“Ahem! Testing, testing... Ah, good! Hello Art, this is Sylvia.”

My heart fluttered as I instantly responded to the voice. “Sylvia! I'm here! Can you hear—”

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" "If you're listening to this right now, it means I have shown you what I actually am..."

Ah, it was some kind of recording that she had infused into me when she gouged that small hole into my mana core.

"...You're nowhere near ready right now to know the whole truth. Knowing you, if I were to have told you who that figure in the sky had been, you would have brashly tried to fight. Little Art, you are barely passed the age of four. Upon looking at your mana core, I have realized that you have a rare talent, seeing as your mana core is already dark red in color. I will leave you with this: I have infused with you my unique will. This is something incomparable to a normal beast's will. Your future progress as a mage depends on how well you will be able to use my will that is embedded into your mana core..."

Was that why the purple in her eyes and golden patterns disappeared?

"The moment your mana core reaches a level past the white stage is when you will hear from me again. At that time, I will explain everything and what you do from there is your choice."

There was a stage past white?

"Lastly, Art... I know you may be in grief, but remember that you have your family to look out for and the stone I entrusted you with. My only wish is for you to embrace the joys and innocence of childhood, train hard, and make your parents and I proud. Do not go chasing after shadows in a fit of rage. Killing the ones that are responsible for my death will neither bring me back to life nor make you feel better. There is a reason for everything and I do not regret what has happened. With this, I bid you farewell for now. Remember, protect your family and the stone, study what I have left you, and enjoy this life, King Grey."

" ... "

That name and title was from my previous world.

She had known the entire time...

Did she discover something in my mana core? Was she able to look into my memories?

So many questions, but the only one who could answer them was gone.

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I refused to move for a long time, staying in my cozy fetal position, deep in thought.

Sylvia was right. She had said all of this knowing what my life back in my old world was like. I can't make the same mistake of living for the sake of solely pursuing strength. I wanted to be strong, but I also want to live my life without regret. I want to live a life that Sylvia would be proud of. I don't think she'd be happy, even if I reached whatever stage was after white while living a life of only training. No, I needed to hurry and reach my family.

But before that... where the hell was I?

Looking around, trees that towered high over my head surrounded me. There was a dense fog that loomed thickly a couple centimeters off the ground, filling the air with nearly palpable moisture.

Trees and an unnaturally thick fog...

I sank back on my butt, crestfallen at what this could only mean.

I was in the Forest of Elshire.

A disheartened sigh escaped from my mouth as I picked myself up.

It seems like I won't be meeting my family anytime soon. It had been over four months since I had fallen off of the cliff. My family had most likely either gone back to Ashber or had maybe even decided to stay in Xyrus.

I didn't have any sort of provisions except for the clothes on my back and the strange stone that was wrapped in Sylvia's feather. This cursed fog limited my vision to about a few meters around me. While reinforcing my eyes with mana helped quite a bit, that didn't solve the even bigger problem of how to get out of this place.

I reinforced my body, enabling mana rotation that had become second nature to me by now. Right now, I could only absorb about roughly twenty percent of what I could do while just meditating, but I couldn't complain.

The only downside to mana rotation was that it wasn't a replacement for strengthening your mana core. In order for me to purify my mana core and get it to the next stages, I need to solely focus on gathering mana, from both my body and the surrounding atmosphere, and use that to get rid of the impurities little by little. One

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notable thing I felt was that after getting my mana core to dark red, the amount of mana I could store inside increased significantly. While the size didn't increase, I'm guessing the purity allowed more mana to be stored.

I climbed a few branches up the nearest tree and situated myself once I got high enough. I focused mana into only my eyes, enhancing my vision even further.

What I was looking for wasn't a way out but more so for any signs of humans. Sylvia had said that I would be teleported close to humans, so I was hoping that there were adventurers traveling through here that would direct me, or even escort me, out of the forest.

After about ten minutes of searching, jumping from tree to tree, I found what I was looking for.

I hopped a few more trees, feeling quite proud of my primate nimbleness, stopping at a branch just a few meters away. Hiding myself behind the thick trunk, I observed the group of humans.

Something was off.

I hid myself completely behind the trunk and closed my eyes, imbuing mana into my ears.

“NOOO! HELP! SOMEONE, PLEASE HELP! MOMMY! DADDY! NOOO! I’M SCARED!!!”

“Someone shut her up! She’s going to attract attention!”

THUD

“Quick. Put her in the back of the carriage. We’re only a few days away from the mountain range. We’ll be safer then. Don’t relax and keep moving.”

“Hey, Boss? How much do ya reckon she’ll sell for? Elf girls go for a lot, don’t they?”

Hehe, she’s a child too, so a virgin at that! I bet she’ll fetch us a lot of money, huh?!”

Slave traders!

I carefully took a peek to spot the small-sized carriage, enough to tightly cram in about five or six adults. I turned back around just in time to see a middle-aged man hauling

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a little girl into the back of the carriage. She looked to be around six or seven, with a silvery hue in her hair and the trademark pointed ears that elves were known for.

What should I do? How were they even able to kidnap one in the first place? The Elshire Forest's magical fog was supposed to disorient the senses of even the most capable mage.

After a few more seconds of observing, I found my answer.

Attached to leashes were mana beasts that looked like a mix between a deer and a dog, with antlers that branched out, like a complicated satellite. They were mentioned briefly in the encyclopedia I always carried with me. The forest hounds were native to the Forest of Elshire and could navigate even better than the elves could.

How those brutes acquired forest hounds, I had no idea, but I needed to think of a plan.

Option one: Steal one of the forest hounds and have it lead me out of the forest.

Option two: Kidnap the kidnapped elf girl to have her lead me out of the forest.

Option three: Kill all of the slave traders and set the elf girl free, then take the forest hounds and have them lead me out of the forest.

Pondering for a couple of minutes, I'm faced with a dilemma. Option one would be easiest, but it didn't sit right with me to just leave the elf girl.

But then again, who knows... maybe she'll get bought by a kind old man who will free and take her back to her home.

...Fat chance...

Option two had the obvious flaw that, once I saved the elf, she wouldn't lead me out of the forest and just insist on going back home and the slave traders probably wouldn't take it too kindly. Option three had the best

outcome, but was by far the most pain in the butt, considering there were four of them and only one of me. Because of the fog, I couldn't sense if any of them were mages, but it was safe to assume that at least one of them would be. Being able to capture an elf in the forest meant that they were either very lucky, or professionals.

After letting out another deep breath, I couldn't help but notice how often I sighed

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these days. Option three it was.

After hours of observation, I had learned enough about them to make a move. I waited until nightfall to put my plan in action. Despite their rustic appearances, the slave traders were surprisingly vigilant; they never built a fire and always kept two people on guard at all times.

After stirring up the forest hounds with a carefully-thrown rock, I made my move as soon as one of the two on guard went around to the other side of the carriage to quiet them.

The one that stayed behind was sitting on a fallen log, fiddling with something in his hands while the other two were sleeping inside the tent. Carefully, jumping to a branch directly above the carriage, I prepared for my attack.

My first target would be the one that had gone to quiet the forest hounds first.

I dropped down with a quiet thud behind one of the slave traders. This man had a very lanky build. While lean muscles were visible, he didn't seem too strong and was only armed with a long knife.

Startled by the soft thud, Lanky turned around, probably expecting a curious weasel or rat. His face twisted into a mixture of surprise and

amusement when he saw me, a four-year-old child in ragged clothes. But before he had the chance to even speak, I lunged upward towards his neck.

I infused mana into the blade of my hand, turning it into a sharp edge. This was called the "Swordless Ar"t in my old world but here, it would be more accurate to call it a wind attribute technique.

He flinched back reflexively, his hands trying to reach where his face was to guard against the boy shooting towards him.

It was too late.

I take a quick swipe at the jugular, taking his vocal cord out along with his carotid artery. A stream of blood sprayed out of his neck immediately as I landed behind him, supporting his lifeless body and gently placing him down to avoid making noise. Just as expected, the forest hounds that had just been calmed down by Lanky jolted back awake at the stench of blood, causing them to howl and bark.

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"Ey Pinky! Can't even calm the hounds... What the?!"

I had already picked up... Pinky's knife and was waiting for him at the back corner of the carriage.

While the other slave trader's attention was directed at the corpse of Pinky, currently being eaten by the forest hounds, I jumped out from behind and stabbed the side of his neck with the knife.

The hounds quieted down while devouring the two corpses. As I headed towards the tent to dispose of the remaining two in their sleep, a shrill cry ruined my plans.

"HELLLLP! MOMMY! SOMEONE! ANYONE! PLEASEE!!"

Son of a... why now of all times?

On cue, I heard the rustle of the tent as the two slave traders that were left had come out. “Pinky! Deuce! The kid is awake! What the hell are you guys...” he barked, still half-asleep.

I swallowed down the inappropriate urge to laugh at the ridiculous names of the slave traders, and hid myself behind a tree next to the carriage to infuse mana into Pinky’s knife.

Sensing something was amiss, the two remaining slave traders carefully stepped around to the other side of the carriage where their eyes bulged upon witnessing their two former companions being eaten by the forest hounds.

Using this chance, I attacked the nearest one when his gaze whipped back at me, his short sword instantly swinging at my face.

Dodging the slash, I dropped low and dashed toward him, trying to get in range with my knife. I swung, reinforcing more mana into the knife, landing a clean wound through his right leg’s Achilles’ heel.

“Gah!!” he let out a pained howl as he dove desperately out of my range before I could do any further damage.

“Danton, be careful! I think this brat is a mage!” the fighter, whose tendon I just severed, cried.

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I turned my attention to Danton as he pulled out his sword from its sheath and lower into a defensive stance.

“You see all sorts of crazy things these days! Looks like a huge sack of gold just showed itself in front of us, George! I bet he’ll get us almost as much as the elf,” he let out a crazed chuckle.

These bastards didn’t even care that I just killed their party members.

Danton's body glowed faintly as he reinforced his body with mana. As he advanced towards me, his lips curled into a confident grin on his square face.

George was out of the fight with that crippled leg, but this augementer was going to be trouble.

The augementer named Danton suddenly jumped above me, his right arm poised to throw a punch. I could only guess that his only reason for not using his sword was to not damage his "goods." While I'd normally be offended, in this case, overconfidence made it much easier for me, so I didn't complain.

I jumped back in time to avoid the blow strong enough to leave a small dent in the ground as I threw my knife at him. I used the same trick as I did with the conjurer I dragged down with me off the cliff, but this mage was a more careful. He disrupted the mana string with his sword and grabbed my knife with his free hand.

Shit.

I was in a bad position right now. Danton wasn't tall, but his reach was still a good amount longer than mine. He also had a sword, which he now deemed it necessary to use, that further increased his range.

Wasting no time, Danton dashed toward me and threw back the knife I had just launched at him. I easily dodged, but not in time to react for his next move as he swiped my ankle with his sheathe. As I stumbled to regain balance, he used that chance to grab ahold of my ankle and flipped me upside down.

His confident face crumpled as I punched the hand that was holding onto me as I concentrated mana. I used a fire attribute technique, releasing all of the mana focused on my fist, and aimed for the weak joint of his wrist.

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A loud crack, followed by a howl of profanities, indicated the attack was enough.

His broken wrist released my ankle and I landed awkwardly on my back. Quickly jumping up to my feet, I picked up Pinky's knife and used the chance to charge towards the wounded Danton. While he was still preoccupied by the pain from his wrist, he angrily cursed, "You're DEAD now, you piece of shit! I don't care if I can't sell you anymore!"

His left wrist was wounded, leaving a gap in his defense. I willed more mana into my feet and arrived in range, about to land a solid hit to his side, when I saw him furiously swinging his sword down.

He fell for it!

I quickly pivot with my left foot in place, spinning to my right. Dodging the swing by a hair's breadth, I entered into my knife's range to his right side, open because of his last desperate swing.

He immediately tried to jump back, but I placed my right foot behind his leg, making him lose his balance. In one quick thrust, I jabbed my knife below his armpit, through the gap between his ribs and into his lungs.

He was easy to finish off after his breath collapsed from the wound.

I was now left with the immobile George.

I couldn't use Danton's sword since it was too large and heavy for my body, so I made use of Pinky's knife one last time and swiped George's jugular. The poor fighter couldn't really contest or run away with his useless leg, and died with a look of disbelief. Much like his two comrades, fed to the hounds.

It seemed that the elf girl knew there was fighting going on by her eerie quietness.

I climbed up onto the back of the carriage where she was locked and I spotted her shivering in the corner with dirty rags minimally covering her

privates. She studied me in surprise and doubt, her eyes almost saying, “He can’t have been the one who saved me, right?”

I untied her as she remained silent, her swollen turquoise eyes never leaving my face.

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Tired and feeling gross, I helped her up and simply stated, “You should go back home now.”

“Hic... hic...”

She probably didn’t know whether I was an enemy or friend until now, but once the word ‘home’ was said, a look of relief washed over her tense face and she broke down.

“Hic! I was so scared! They were going to sell me! Hic! I thought I was never going to see my family again! Hic! WAAAAAA!”

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It had felt like a good hour before the little elf girl was finally able to settle down. I didn’t blame her; being forcibly kidnapped would cause trauma even for adults, even more so since she seemed to be only a bit older than I was.

As I sat next to her, comforting her, I realized how bizarre of a scene this made. A four-year-old boy tenderly patting the head of an elven girl in the back of a carriage as four bloody corpses were being devoured by beasts just next to them.

“W-What happened to those bad guys?” she sniffled, her voice coming out a bit nasally.

Not knowing if telling the seven-year-old about killing was appropriate, I simply dismissed it by telling her, “Er... they ran into a very unfortunate accident.”

She studied the hesitant expression on my face with the raise of a brow, only to look back down and whisper, “Serves them right.” Looking closely at her now, I couldn’t help but notice that she carried all of the necessary features that would allow her to blossom into quite the beauty later on in the future.

With long, gunmetal gray hair that I mistook for silver in the sunlight, the girl’s disheveled state couldn’t mask the innate beauty that seemed to radiate from her pores.

A pair of gleaming teal eyes shaped like perfectly rounded almonds quivered and her perky nose, o red from crying, matched the color of her rosy lips. While all of her individual facial features seemed to be carefully molded gems, on the fair creamy skin of her face that was the canvas, her features were brought into a surreal, almost phantasmal work of art.

Of course, this was me just observing her speculatively as a gentleman and king who enjoyed beauty in the world. I wouldn’t go as far to say I was “checking her out.”

I helped her up to her feet before speaking again.

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“Those people that tried to kidnap you aren’t going to chase you anymore. That being said, do you think you can make it to your home by yourself?”

Instantly, her eyes retracted in fear as a panicked expression spread throughout the rest of her face. As tears welled up and both her hands

clenched tightly to my shirt, even an infant would be able to tell what her answer was through her actions.

“Look, I need to get home, too. Aren’t elves generally safe in this forest?” I let out a sigh, trying to pry her claws—I mean fingers—from my shirt.

She violently shook her head, much like a dog drying itself, and rebutted, “Beasts are only scared of adults... Parents warned me that children will get eaten by hounds or tree golems.”

I would normally be pretty amazed by something like a tree golem, but it was becoming pretty hard to find something that surprised me after witnessing a demon king metamorph into a dragon.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, trying to come up with a solution for all of this.

“How long does it take to get to where you live from here?”

“...”

Still holding onto my shabby shirt, she looked down and admitted, “...I don’t know.”

I held in the temptation to let out another sigh, since the poor girl looked like she was about to cry already, and agreed to take her back home.

The Kingdom of Elenoir was quite a long ways north, so my only hope was that there would be a teleportation gate there that can could take me back to somewhere, anywhere, in Sapin.

I instructed the elf girl to wait inside the carriage while I gathered some necessities; the main reason being, I didn’t want her to see the mangled carcasses of the slave traders when even I found it hard to stomach. Finally finding a backpack small enough for me to wear without it dragging on the ground, I carefully folded and stuffed a small tent inside, along with a leather water bag and some dried rations. I picked up Pinky’s knife from the ground where I fought Danton and George and strapped it to the front of my

waist to balance the awkwardly large equipment on my back. Before heading

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back into the carriage, I freed the forest hounds after realizing that, while they were able to pull a carriage, they weren't able to be ridden.

I thought briefly about riding the carriage to the elven kingdom, but thought it was too dangerous and we would stick out like sore thumbs in the forest.

"Let's head out now," I said, trying to sound more enthusiastic for her sake.

"En!" She nodded, hopping out of the carriage as I led her away from the carriage where all of the dead bodies were.

I learned a lot about the elf girl along the way. For one, her name was Tessia Eralith and she had actually just turned five, which meant that she was about a year older than I was, albeit physiologically, that is.

Tessia was also a pretty reserved, if not shy, girl. She was very polite to me, considering I was younger than she was, and never complained, making her a very agreeable traveling companion. Perhaps, if I wasn't traveling in the opposite direction of my destination, I would have actually enjoyed having her with me.

With the sun setting and the fog thickening, we pitched a tent underneath the sprouted roots of a particularly large tree for the night.

I couldn't fit any of the supporting rods in the backpack, so I used the long rope I brought with me instead, tied it to two of the roots and hung the tent canvas over it, weighing down the ends with moss-covered rocks. After I finished setting up the tent, I took out a couple of dried rations and handed some to her.

"...Thank you very much." She gave a slight bow.

“You know, you don’t have to be so polite to me. I am younger than you and I’d feel a lot more comfortable if you weren’t so on-edge,” I replied, my cheeks full of dried food.

“O-okay, I’ll try!” She let out a shy smile as she held back a chuckle.

I began wondering if she had been raised by very strict parents. Maybe it was simply an elf custom, and by telling her to be more comfortable with me, I was inadvertently inviting her to marry me. Giving her a shrug, I resumed stuffing my face with more food.

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We sat underneath one of the roots of the tree next to our tent and continued chatting.

“C-can you tell me about the human kingdom?” she suddenly asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“What did you want to know?”

“What is a human city like? How are humans? Is it true that all male humans are perverts and have more than one wife?”

I choked on the dried fruits I was chewing on, spraying them out before they got caught in my lungs.

“No. Although it isn’t against the law, only nobility and the royal families tend to have multiple wives,” I said after composing myself, wiping my mouth.

“I see now!” her eyes seemed to say, still sparkling.

Do you really?

I go on, explaining a bit about the town of Ashber and my family, to pass the time before I asked as well.

“What is it like living in Elenoir?”

“Mmmm.....” She pondered a bit before finding the words to explain.

“I don’t think it’s too different from what you told me about where you grew up, except the children all have to go to school to learn about our history and how to read and write. When we awaken, we get mentors assigned to us and we become their disciples.

From there, a lot of it is just training with your master.”

“I see...” I mutter, pondering about the different education systems of the humans and elves. While the educational method of the elves was a lot more advanced and undiscriminating, it only worked because the elven kingdom was much smaller and tightly-knit compared to the human kingdom, but it just went to show how culture made such a big difference in the future generations.

Getting up from the ground, I held my hand out to help her get up. I noticed her hesitation when she turned a little red, but I assumed it was just my eyes playing with

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me in the dark.

“Sleep in the tent, I’ll keep guard next to you outside.”

I see her thinking for a little as her eyes fixed on me, full of resolve.

“I don’t mind sh-sharing the tent, if you’re okay with it.” She tried to sound nonchalant but her voice betrayed her.

“It’s okay. I’m not that sleepy right now, anyway,” I replied a lot faster than I had meant to.

“...Okay,” she sulked. Did her ears just droop a little?

Making sure she went inside the tent, I leaned against the massive tree trunk and began meditating.

I started inspecting my mana core. Sylvia left me with something she calls her “will,”

but how did that affect my mana core? Inspecting even closer, I noticed, ever so faintly, some markings in my mana core when,

“A-Arthur?” Tessia’s head poked out of the tent.

“Is there something wrong?” I asked, turning my head to face her.

“W-well! You see... beasts will more likely appear if they notice you because they will see that you are a child. Therefore, I propose that for our safety, it would be better for you to c-come inside the tent.” At this point, Tessia had covered her face with the tent’s opening flap, peeking with only one eye.

“Pft~ Tessia, are you scared to sleep by yourself in the tent?” I chuckled.

“A-absolutely not! I was just suggesting, for both of our safety, what the best choice would be!” she insisted, leaning out, nearly tumbling out of the tent.

“If that’s the case, then I’ll hide up in the tree and continue to be on the lookout. You know... for ‘our safety’,” I winked.

“Uu...” She hid herself back inside the tent before muttering softly, “...I’m scared to sleep by myself.”

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Smiling to myself, I opened the flap and crawled inside the tent.

Caught by surprise, Tessia let out a small yelp before immediately lying down with her back to me. Seeing how red her ears were, I easily could see

myself enjoying teasing the poor elf.

After a few silent moments, she peeked over her shoulder. “Can I hold onto your shirt?”

Seeing her tremble, I remembered that she was just a child. I couldn’t imagine how hard it must have been for her; getting kidnapped, being separated from her family and carried off, not knowing if she’ll ever see them again.

Scooting closer to her, I gave her head another soft pat as she turned her body and clutched the edge of my tattered shirt. Her eyes closed in content and after a few minutes, I hear her breathing turn rhythmic, as I began drifting off to sleep too, still sitting up.

My eyes fluttered open on their own and it took a few seconds to remember where I was. I looked down to see Tessia’s head on my lap, her body curled up comfortably.

Gently shaking her awake, I whispered, “Tessia, we should head out now.”

She slowly stirred awake, but when she realized the position we were in, her body shot up with a surprised shriek. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to... w-was I heavy?”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s fold up the tent,” I replied with a wry smile. Her cheeks slightly pink, she nodded in response and we began packing everything up before resuming our journey.

A few more days had passed by fairly uneventfully when, out of nowhere, I was struck with deep aches in my abdomen. The first pains occurred on the third day of the trip; We were inside the tent, Tessia already fast asleep, when a sudden searing ache spread from my sternum. It disappeared soon enough, but even that brief moment caused a pain that left me in shivers.

Besides that, the most exciting occurrence was when a couple of forest hounds tried to get close, but a throw of my mana-reinforced knife chased them away.

Nights passed as I continued sleeping in the tent with Tessia and her growing more comfortable around me, at least comfortable enough not to get embarrassed every

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time she woke up. Our conversations became more natural and had less awkward silence as she began joking around with me, even teasing me about the way I talk; in her words she said that I "tried too hard to sound like an adult." Fortunately, my worries that the wave of pain might occur again went. Our pace wasn't impeded by any tree golems or even stronger mana beasts looking for children to snack on.

"Can you tell how far we are from Elenoir now, Tessia?" I asked on a particularly clear morning on the fifth day of our journey.

Her elongated ears twitched as she began surveying her surroundings. Suddenly, she ran to a particularly crooked tree and ran her fingers over the trunk. A few minutes of silence went by before she came, visibly excited.

"That tree is the one I used to come to with my Grandfather sometimes! I remember carving my name into the trunk of the tree when he wasn't looking. We're not too far anymore! I think that if we quicken our pace a little bit, we'll be able to make it by tonight!" she said, pointing to the tree.

"Sounds good," I answered, following behind her. As lovely as the journey had been, I needed to make my plans to somehow get home, and that wouldn't be possible until I got her home.

Although, I admit, I'd probably miss her after this.

"Arthur? You said your family and the people close to you called you Art. I feel that, through this journey, I have gotten close enough to call you that as well." We were crossing a stream atop a moss-covered log bridge when she suddenly stopped. "So...

can I call you Art as well?” Tessia turned around, revealing a wide smile.

“Hmm? Sure, I don’t mind,” I said, returning her smile.

“You ‘don’t mind’? Tch, you could sound a bit more enthusiastic...” she stuck her tongue out at me.

“I would be honored to be called Art by you, your highness,” I made a bow gracious enough for a noble, despite my tattered clothes.

“Hehe, and you may also have the honor to call me Tess,” she giggled, curtsying back at me before turning back around and hopping off the log.

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We continued on the rest of the day, with only a few quick stops to rest ourselves and replenish our stomachs. Constant use of mana rotation had kept my body from being strained, but it was obvious that Tess was growing wearier.

After our last quick rest on a soft patch of moss, we continued forward for the last stretch. Tess and I had gotten a lot closer on this journey; the once shy and reserved elf girl showed bright smiles that were contagious, despite our less than comfortable conditions. She would continue teasing me too, saying that I should call her older sister since she was a whole year older than I was. I teased her back, imitating her when she was crying, rubbing my eyes and yelling, “WAAA~ MOMMY, I’M SCARED!”

This turned her bright red. She smacked my arm before she started to pout. Crossing her arms and lower lip protruding, she stomped off before yelling, “HMPH! Meanie!”

It was dusk now and the fog around us seemed to be getting thicker. My sense of direction was all but useless in this blasted forest. Enough so that, if I were to get separated from Tess, I could wind up traveling in circles without even realizing it.

She suddenly turned to me, her face a mixture of happiness and hesitation before she muttered, “We’re here.”

Looking around, the only things visible were clusters of trees and fog. Confused, I was about to ask where we were, but I stopped myself when I saw Tess placing both her palms on a tree and muttering a chant.

Suddenly, the fog around us was sucked into the same tree and what came into vision was a giant wooden door that seemed to be propped up by itself on the ground.

Tess grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the door. When she opened it, I was reminded of the portal that Sylvia had pushed me through. The experience didn’t feel any better the second time but I at least knew what to expect. As we softly landed on our feet, arriving at our destination, I immediately rummaged through my bag to make sure I still had the stone Sylvia entrusted me with. It was only after confirming that it was still there did I finally look up and take in the scene around us.

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Pristine.

That was the word that popped into my head as I gawked at the elven city. It appeared we had directly teleported right past the gates. What I saw before me were buildings that seemed to be built out of a jade-like material. These jade buildings were so flawless and smooth that each seemed to be carved from a single, huge stone.

Making this place look even more awe-inspiring were the huge trees that intertwined with the buildings, filling this whole city with a more distinctive and organic ambience.

Looking up, I see homes built on unnaturally thick branches extending out of the massive trunks even larger than the buildings with smoke drifting out of their chimneys.

The entire ground inside this city was covered in a lush field of soft moss, with only the narrow sidewalks and the main road paved with smooth stone. The dense array of branches that fanned out from the trees covered most of the city in a canopy of shade, but there was a warm, luminescent glow throughout the city thanks to numerous floating orbs of light situated in every corner and street.

While I stood, slack-jawed, still processing the world around me, a shadow whizzed in front of me suddenly, jolting me awake.

Tess was still holding onto my hand when a group of what seemed like guards arrived out of nowhere. These elven warriors emanated a dignified air, all dressed in coordinated black suits with green trimmings and a golden shoulder guard on their left shoulder. These five guards all carried a rapier strapped to their waist. I mentally noted that these guards had no sensible aura radiating out of them.

Augmenters and conjurers both naturally emit a faint aura from their bodies. The fact that I wasn't able to sense any mana leaking meant one of two things: their mana cores were at a high enough level where I wasn't able to sense it, or they had enough control over their mana to not let any leak out. Either way, it meant that these guys were as impressive as their attire made them look.

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The guards ignored my presence as they suddenly kneeled in front of Tess in unison.

"We welcome back the royal princess."

“...” My gaze flicked back and forth between the guards and Tess and I’m reminded of the time when I jokingly called her ‘your highness.’

Tessia was actually the princess of this whole kingdom?

When I tried to let go of her hand, she suddenly squeezed mine tighter. In a voice so cold and apathetic that I mistook her voice for someone else’s, she said, “You may rise.”

They stood up with their right fists still crossing their chests when the knight in front spoke. “Princess, we arrived as soon as we saw that the royal teleportation gate had been used. The King and Queen are...”

Before he could finish speaking, I heard a cry not too far away.

“My baby! Tessia, you’re okay! Oh, my baby!”

Running towards us was a middle-aged man and woman. From the crown on the man’s head and the tiara encircling the woman’s forehead, I assumed they were the King and Queen.

The King’s tall, built body was uniformed in a loose, decorated robe. His emerald eyes were pointed upwards and his thin lips were tensed, matching his short, military-style hair.

While the King had a dignified but somewhat reserved appearance, the Queen was breathtaking. Although she was a bit past her youthful stage, her age couldn’t mask the beauty she was. Her round eyes shimmered a light blue hue, contrasting well with her lush, pink-colored lips. Her silver hair was curled down, flailing past her back as she ran towards us, her well-proportioned figure visible underneath her dress.

The mother’s cheeks were lined with tears as the father had a tense expression that looked like he was holding back tears as well.

I turned my gaze to see Tess’s face visibly soften as she started tearing up as well. I let go of her hand and gently pushed her towards her parents, feeling a little sentimental myself.

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Tess landed in the arms of her mother, both starting to sob at this point on their knees, both burying their faces in their daughter's shoulders.

The last to arrive was an old man well past his prime. His facial features are all sharp, with a gaze that could kill someone on contact. His hair was pure white and was tied in the back, face cleanly shaven. This elderly man didn't say anything, but his eyes did warm up a little when he saw Tessia.

It took several minutes for Tess and her parents to settle down. In the meantime, the guards were glaring at me with daggers in their eyes, and even the elder was eyeing me curiously.

The King finally stood up and while his eyes were red, he still carried an air of dignity.

"As the King of Elenoir and the father of Tessia, I must apologize for this unsightly appearance of mine and more importantly, I wish to thank you for escorting my daughter back home safely," he stated, his voice coming out a bit hoarse. "Please accompany us to our home so that you may rest. After, you can tell us what happened."

His tone was gentle but implied that there wasn't really an option, so I simply nodded in consent. As I was about to follow behind them, Tess came to me and grabbed my hand again, filling the surrounding people with expressions of shock. I couldn't help but chuckle uncomfortably as I scratched the side of my head, unable to muster up the appropriate words for a situation like this.

After a strenuously awkward ride that seemed a lot longer than it actually had been, we arrived at the castle. Rather than a castle, however, it looked to be an enormous tree. This tree, that probably needed at least a few hundred people locking arms to encircle it, was made of a white stone that, I could only guess, had gone through a petrification process somehow.

Stepping through the front doors of the tree, I was pleasantly surprised to see how impressive the interior of this castle was. There were two curved staircases that created a circle, with a gigantic chandelier floating in the middle of it. This chandelier seemed to be made of the same orbs of light that were dotted throughout the city.

I had told the King and Queen that it wasn't necessary for me to rest and would rather tell them as soon as we arrived, so that's what we did.

Not even washing up, the welcoming crew was all situated around the rectangular

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dining table downstairs. Tess's father was on the far end of the table with me directly opposite of him. Tessia's mother sat perpendicular to her husband, with Tessia seated right next to her. The grandpa was sitting across from the mother and daughter, leaving a pretty big gap between us, while the five guards stood off to the side behind the King.

With both his elbows resting on the table, fingers intertwined, the King was the first to speak. "Child. What did you say your name was?"

"Forgive me for the late introduction. My name is Arthur Leywin, and I come from a remote town in the Kingdom of Sapin. A pleasure to make your acquaintance King, Queen, Elder, and gentlemen." I stood up and bowed slightly at each of them individually before sitting back down.

Discussion wasn't going to progress if they were going to treat me like a child.

Both the King and Queen as well as the guards in the back showed evident looks of surprise from my mature behavior, while even the grandpa had an amused smirk on his face; Tess giving me a shy smile.

Regaining composure, the King continued on. “It seems you are much more mature than your age. Forgive me for assuming. My name is Alduin Eralith and this is my wife, Merial Eralith and my father Virion Eralith. As for what happened, please tell us. We would like to hear your side of this.”

Waving off the apology, I began telling the story. I made sure to be very vague in telling them how I got inside the Forest of Elshire in the first place; I simply told them I had gotten separated from my family after running into bandits, only managing to survive out of luck.

Inevitably, I had to tell them I was a mage. This was followed by another wave of looks of utter disbelief from everyone, including Tess. Because of the lack of obstacles we ran into on our journey back, I never really had the need to use mana, so I didn’t bother explaining.

One of the guards told me that I was a liar and to prove that I was actually a mage when, unexpectedly, Tess’s grandfather shut him down. He then clasped his hands together on the table and looked at me with a renewed, eerie interest.

I quickly moved on, telling them how I had spotted a carriage and observed them

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carrying a tied up child into the back of a carriage before going off.

At this, the King slammed both of his hands on the table, his eyes narrowing into a menacing glare.

“I should’ve known it was humans...”

I corrected his mildly racist comment and said, “They were slave traders. Them and bandits alike prey on not just elves, but humans as well, speaking as a victim myself.”

This caused the King to shut his mouth before sitting back down, letting out a soft cough.

“I didn’t ask Tess... *ahem*, the Princess this, but I am curious as to how slave traders even got their hands on the princess of this kingdom,” I queried, almost calling Tessia by her nickname. I didn’t think calling her something so informal as Tess would sit right with everyone present.

At this, the King almost looked embarrassed before saying, “My wife and I had a bit of a disagreement with Tessia and she decided to rebel by running away. We had decided to let her cool off a bit before fetching her back because we knew where she usually stayed when she pouted, but unfortunately, she ran into some hu... slave traders.”

Ah... runaway princess. I sneak in a small grin at Tess and she responded by sticking out her tongue, face flushed.

I glazed over the details of the fight with the slave traders.

“Luckily, I had caught the slave traders by surprise and managed to dispose of them before untying the princess and escorting her here.”

“So a four-year-old managed to ‘luckily’ kill off four adults, one being an augmenter at that, and you simply wave it off like it’s no big deal,” chimes in the king’s father seated across from Tess, leaning back on the chair so only two of the legs were touching the ground.

“Yes. Half of them were asleep and the two were simply not on guard so disposing of them was not too challenging,” I refuted back.

The elder just responded with a lazy shrug of his shoulder.

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After finishing the events, I cleared my throat before asking what I came here for. “As I have mentioned, it has been almost four months since I have

seen my parents. I do not plan to intrude on your kingdom for long as I wish to meet them quickly, so I was wondering if you guys had a teleportation gate that could take me to the City of Xyrus or anywhere inside Sapin.”

“You’re going to leave already, Art?!” Tess shot up from her seat, face stricken with panic.

Both her mother and father gave each other a baffled look as they mouthed ‘Art.’

The elder just shot a snide grin at this and chuckled, rocking on his chair.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for a human such as myself to be inside this Kingdom for too long, Princess. Besides, I wish to make sure that my family is safe and tell them I’m okay as well,” I answered, giving a sheepish smile.

The King responds back for Tess. “It has been a couple hundred years since the last human has stepped foot into the Kingdom of Elenoir and you, Arthur, are the first human to be in the capital of this Kingdom, the City of Zestier. However, saving our daughter and taking the trouble to accompany her all the way back to us entitles you with a proper reward...”

I take a quick peek at Tess and see her head down, her gunmetal silver hair covering her face.

“...Unfortunately, the teleportation gate linked with the Kingdom of Sapin opens only once every seven years, for the Summit Conference between the three races. Since the last Summit was two years ago, it’ll be another five years until the gate will function,”

the King continued.

I couldn’t help but let out a deep breath of disappointment.

“However, we are more than willing to send a group of guards to escort you back home.

You are correct that it may not be wise to stay in this kingdom for too long. While some are tolerant, many hold animosity towards humans because of the war long ago.” He flashed a brief, sorrowful smile at this.

I nodded in agreement. At least I’d be able to safely go back home.

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“For now, please make yourself at home here. We will have your escorts prepared by tomorrow morning. I do advise you not to wander around outside in the city though, for the reasons mentioned earlier.”

The King snapped his finger and an elderly elf lady in a tan maid uniform rushed out, leading me to my room.

The room I was led to was large, but elegantly simple in furnishings. While the only furniture consisted of a couch, tea table, bed, and dresser, each looked to be handcrafted out of wood by seasoned craftsmen. As soon as I got into the room, I closed the door behind me, stripped, and went straight for the bathroom. The shower was a pleasant surprise; it was a simple waterfall that seemed to naturally flow from the ceiling and drain back out in the floor. However, the constant flow of water that didn’t seem to ever turn off was a surprisingly pleasant temperature, just warm enough to relax my body and pores.

As I finished dressing into a very silky robe just for your top and short pants, I placed the stone Sylvia left me inside the chest pocket and once again, tried to study my mana core.

About thirty minutes in and making only minimal progress, I hear a knock on my door.

“Coming!”

Opening the door, I’m greeted by a pouting Tess who threw a light punch at my chest.

“You dummy! Why did you act all unfriendly when you were with my family back there?” she harrumphed, slipping past me and sitting on my bed.

“Well first of all, you didn’t mention to me that you happened to be the princess of this entire kingdom!” Shaking my head, I gripped Tess’s hand and pulled her out of my room. Kids or not, I didn’t think her parents were going to like her being in a boy’s room.

“Come on, show me around the castle! I won’t get the chance to visit this place again.”

I immediately regretted saying this.

I hear a slight sniffle as Tess suddenly broke down into tears, trying to talk while sobbing.

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“Art! I don’t want you to *sniff* leave... You’re the first *sniff* person I’ve gotten ever close to...”

“ ...”

I just gently patted her head while she was rubbing her eyes with the arm not holding onto my hand.

As we continued walking in silence, except for Tess’s soft sniffles, we made it outside to the courtyard at the back of the castle. The floating orbs were giving off a dim, luminescent glow, lighting up the well-kept garden in a gentle atmosphere.

I couldn’t help but imagine how differently this scene could’ve been played out if we were ten years older.

Before I even had the chance to finish my thought, a blatantly clear killing intent bombarded my senses. Milliseconds later, a faint glimmer gave off

the position of a projectile aimed at Tess. I pushed the still-crying princess out of the way and prepared to parry the projectile with a mana-infused hand.

At that instant, a figure in black faced my back, his right arm in a stance to attack.

Grabbing the projectile, I immediately spun myself to block the assassin with whatever was thrown at me. To my surprise, I was face-to-face with Tess's grandfather.

I jumped back out of range before angrily shouting, "What the hell?! Why are you trying to kill us?"

"Kid. It may hurt a little but I doubt that toy you're holding could kill anyone," he chuckled.

I looked down at my hand to see a pencil-sized projectile with both ends blunted and coated in a layer of something close to rubber.

I was tricked!

"Haha! Nice reaction, nice reaction! I didn't think you'd catch my little present and use it to block my next attack! Truly marvelous! However, your usage of mana was mediocre at best!"

He proceeded to throw me a wooden sword fit for my size as he took out a wooden

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sword of his own, just a bit bigger.

"Here I come!" Not even giving me the time to get in a stance or even the chance to accept his impromptu training, he dashed towards me.

This crazy old bat!

I lowered my stance and, instead of being defensive, I launched myself at him as well, accelerating my speed to throw off the timing of his swing. Aiming for the fingers gripping his sword, I swung upward, reinforcing my entire body.

Right before my sword came into contact with his hand, I was met with only air as he disappeared from my sight.

Whipping my head back, I spotted him a couple meters apart from where I was standing.

“You’re a scary little brat, aren’t you? Looks like I’ll have to be a bit more serious!” the grandpa smirked.

His speed increased even more. Even with a previous life of only training and battles, I was only barely able to keep him in my sight. However, being able to see him and being able to respond to his attacks were two different things.

I felt like a sandbag as I could only curse at my own body.

I was able to block one move of his out of every three he landed on my body.

Screw technique, this old bat was messing with me through sheer speed. The only reason I was able to somewhat keep up was by using sword techniques and footwork to minimize my movement, along with the fact that, because of my size, I was a small target.

After about ten, long minutes of being treated like a wooden training post, I started noticing some patterns in the grandpa’s attacks.

As he flashed behind me, about to do a horizontal sweep to my legs, I put all of my strength into my legs and leaped back with my sword tucked into my armpit, pointing at his head.

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With a solid thud created from my blow landing, the old bat stumbled a little before gaining balance.

“HAHAHAHA! I guess I deserved that one!” he laughed, rubbing his swollen forehead.

Throughout all of this, Tess was surprised at first, but after realizing it was just a spar, she settled down. She used this chance, though, to jump out and stomp towards the elder.

“Grandpa! You hurt Art too much! You should’ve gone easier on him!” She pinched the elder’s side.

“AHH! That hurts, little one. Haha, I’m afraid if I went easier on Arthur, he’d be the one bullying me!” he gently answered as he picked up his granddaughter.

He flashed in front of me and suddenly placed his right palm into my sternum.

“Just as I thought. Your body is in a dangerous state...”

I stared blankly at him. Through constant use of mana rotation and meditation, my body should be a lot healthier than even the most well-fed four-year-old.

Virion, noticing my doubtful gaze, pressed his palm on my sternum at a certain angle, triggering a familiar searing pain.

“Your mana manipulation is good for a beginner despite your age, and your sword techniques and fighting experience are frightening enough to make me wonder what sort of life you had led to learn all of this.” His eyes narrowed. “But you failed to mention one critical thing in your story earlier.”

I could feel my heartbeat beginning to rise as I started to suspect that he found out about Sylvia.

“I’ve decided. Arthur, become my disciple!” he nodded, throwing me entirely off guard.

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I just stared at him, dumbfounded.

What was this old bat saying?

“What? You can’t be serious, right?” I managed to blurt out.

He just tilted his head in response, “Why not?”

“F-for one thing! I’m a human! Is it even allowed to have humans in this kingdom? Also, I need to make sure my family is okay and tell them I’m still alive,” I refuted.

At this, the grandpa went silent as he pondered a little bit before speaking again.

“Living here isn’t a problem as long as you’re under my name. As for your parents...

Brat, is it an absolute necessity to meet them in person?”

It was my turn to ponder this time.

“I mean; I guess it isn’t strictly a necessity for me to meet my parents in person.

Although I miss them, the most important thing is finding out how they’re doing and letting them know that I’m fine if they are as well,” I answered.

“Then come with me tomorrow morning; be outside the manor by six in the morning, sharp.”

Before he turned to leave, I stopped him, “Wait! I don’t get why you want me as your disciple. Also, you sound awfully hurried. Isn’t it possible for me to go back home and spend a bit of time with my parents before coming back here to train under you?”

“I want you to be my disciple because I see your potential, Kid. An uncountable number of people have asked me to take them in as their disciple, from rich to poor, from young to old. But do you know how many I’ve taken in so far? None! These new generation brats bore me. Just because some wealthy noble brat’s parents thought

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their kid was special, they thought they were qualified to ask me to be their mentor!”

I just furrowed my brows, not knowing where Tess’s grandpa was going with this.

“...You’re different. I know you have exceptional talent in mana manipulation and only God knows how, but you possess better technique than even I, but that isn’t the reason why I decided on teaching you. Brat... I need to ask you. How are you a beast tamer?”

Any sort of amusement that had been on his face previously was all but gone as his sharp facial features emitted a deathly gaze.

“Beast tamer? What are you talking about?” I was really confused. Although it was getting well into the night and the elder had already sent Tess to sleep, it didn’t seem like this conversation was going to end soon.

“Let’s go back inside and talk,” he said, leading me to a living room with couches and a roaring fireplace.

Sitting down on a couch, he continued. “Let’s start from the beginning. I assume you know that mana beasts possess mana cores just like humans, elves and dwarves, right?”

I nodded at this.

“Right. Just like mana beasts, humans, elves and dwarves possess qualities in their mana cores that are distinct to their own race.”

He picked up a piece of paper and began drawing a chart.

☐ Water - Ice

o Plant

☐ Earth - Gravity

o Magma, Metal

☐ Fire - Lightning

☐ Wind - Sound

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“These are the four basic elements and their higher forms. The higher forms—Ice, Metal, Lightning, and Sound—can only be controlled by mages especially adept at a particular basic element, i.e. a deviant. This is where the distinct racial qualities lie...”

He wrote down each race as he recited a brief description: Humans

“Human mages possess the ability to manipulate all four basic elements and are the only race capable of having deviants that can control the higher form of their adept element. They also have deviants that can even transcend the four basic elements, like healers (emitters), making their mana cores the most diverse.”

Elves

“Elven mages can only manipulate water, wind, and earth, but with much higher affinity. We also have a special trait distinct to our race that allows very pure-blooded mages to control plants. However, elves don’t have deviants that can manipulate water, wind, and earth into their higher forms.”

Dwarves

“Dwarven mages can only manipulate earth and fire but, like elves, they possess a much higher affinity to those two elements. Their distinct trait lies in the fact that all dwarves are able to mold and bend metal, while some deviants possess the special ability to manipulate both earth and fire into magma, something even human deviants are not able to do, much less elves. However, they can only manipulate those two basic elements and, like elves, do not possess the ability to control the higher form of the basic elements.”

“Wait, I’m not getting all of this. Why can’t humans manipulate plants and magma?” I asked while reading his handy info chart.

“Good question. Only elves can manipulate plant, which is the only form of nature that is alive, because of our lineage being highly affinitive to the nurturing elements. Only the Dwarf race can manipulate magma and metal because, like us elves, their lineage makes them highly adept to the constructing elements.”

I started subconsciously rubbing the bridge of my nose as my brain whirled.

“Okay. I get the differences between the three races, but what does that have to do with

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me being a beast tamer? What does that even mean anyway?”

“I’m getting to that, brat!” he barked.

“Mana beasts are different from the three humanoid races because each species has their own special characteristics. Listing all of them would be endless so I’ll give you a simple example. Mages, adventurers or not, are classified: E, D, C, B, A, AA, S, SS class.

This classification is the same for mana beasts as well. Take the sonic hawk. They are B Class beasts that possess incredible speed while in flight. They all have to affinity for wind and sound. These attributes are innate in their mana cores. Regardless of their affinity, if these mana cores are taken out and given to a human or elf mage that specialize in the wind element, their training will go by much faster than just cultivating mana from their surroundings, but that’s it.”

I impatiently waited as elder Virion gulped down a glass of water before continuing.

“...However! When a mana beast reaches A class or higher, they have the ability to pass on their ‘will’, or ability to be more precise, to one person. I called you a beast tamer earlier because you have a mana beast’s will in your mana core and from my estimation, not just any will but an S class mana beast’s will, if not an SS class will. I’m only able to sense this because I’m a beast tamer as well, although the beast’s will that I tamed was an AA class beast, the Shadow Panther.”

So that’s how he was so unusually fast.

Noticing the look of revelation on my face, Elder Virion just chuckled. “Yes brat, I was able to bully you that badly by utilizing my Shadow Panther’s will. But I only used around 50% of my speed.” He shot me a wink.

He was able to go even faster?

Everything was beginning to make sense; the strange, faint markings that appeared on my mana core after Sylvia gouged through it and how she said my future progress would depend on understanding her power.

My eyes welled up with tears as I lowered my head, trying to keep them from falling.

“You must have been through a lot, child. I’m not going to push you for an answer, but the reason why it is urgent for me to guide you is because you don’t have much time,”

he said in a warm but stern voice.

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“What do you mean?” I sniffled, looking up at him.

“The power from your mana core is too strong for your immature body to handle. Let me ask you this, boy. Have you recently felt a burning pain coming from your mana core?” The look on my face must’ve confirmed his suspicions because he nodded solemnly. “If you don’t learn to control your new mana core, it’ll destroy your body.”

His eyes looked straight at me, dissolving any doubt I may have had.

“...”

“I understand. It seems I have no choice but to be under your guidance. However, I don’t think I would be able to focus on training without making sure that my family is all right and that they know I’m safe, too. You mentioned something about that earlier?” I said, trying to keep my emotions under control.

“Haha! Just call me Grandpa from now on. My first disciple should at least be able to call me that. And who knows, maybe I’ll become your grandpa-in-law.” He shot me another wink.

He chuckled as my eyes widened in response before continuing. “We’ll go see an old friend of mine tomorrow that’ll take care of your worries. What I need from you starting now is your utmost diligence. Even I’m not sure how long it’ll take for you to master the basics of your beast’s will. In my two hundred years of living, I’ve never seen such a young mage, let alone a beast tamer at that. You’re going to bring big changes into this world, brat. I just know it.”

I just scratched my cheek, my face hot from embarrassment.

“Go to sleep now, brat! Tomorrow is going to be a long day. You’ll need the rest.”

I got up and bowed before wishing him goodnight. “Goodnight... Grandpa.”

He chuckled, waving me off, and I plopped into my bed, too tired to even get under the covers.

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I roused from my sleep, grunting, feeling a heavy sensation weighing down on my body.

Were they my worries? My burdens? The expectations placed on me? Are these weighing down on me even as I slept?

“G’ morning, Art! Wake up!”

I opened my eyes and see that my burdens had taken the form of a lovely young lady very similar in appearance to my friend, Tess.

“Come on, sleepyhead! You need to meet grandpa soon! H-hey! Don’t go back to sleep!”

She bounced up and down, still straddled on top of me.

Did she not know how indecent this may look to others? Haa... the innocence of youth.

“I get it! I’m up, Tess! Please get down from my stomach so I can get up,” I groaned, still half-asleep.

“Hehe~ Art, your hair looks funny. Hey hey, is it true you’re going to be staying here for a while? Grandpa told me this morning! I’m so happy! You’re really staying, right?”

Right?” Tess exclaimed with a wide smile pasted on her cute face.

How the hell was she so energetic this early in the morning?

Trying to tame my bed hair, I responded, “We’ll know for sure after my trip with Elder Virion, but most likely, it seems I’ll be bothering you for a bit longer, Princess.”

She stabbed my side with her finger, “Not Princess! Tess! T.E.S.S.! I’m going to get upset if you don’t treat me better.”

Damn it, she looked so cute with her pouting face.

“All right, all right! I have to shower and get ready, so unless you want to see me naked, I think you should leave the room, Tess.” I waggled my eyebrows lewdly.

“Eek! I’m leaving, you pervert!” I could see her ears turn scarlet as she scurried out of the room.

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I didn't think that'd work so well. My four-year-old body hadn't even fully matured in any of its "manly parts," anyhow.

I just shrugged and hopped into the shower to get ready, making sure to keep the feather-wrapped stone inside my robe.

As I made my way down the flight of curved stairs, a butler opened the front door for me and I spotted a small carriage with Grandpa Virion and Tess inside.

"Father! It is not appropriate for a human to be residing within this kingdom!"

"Alduin is right, Elder Virion. Although saving Tessia is something I will forever be grateful for, having a human stay here goes against all traditions."

I heard The King and Queen talking to Grandpa Virion as he is lazily leaned back inside the carriage.

"BAH! Screw traditions! I've taken a liking to that brat and so has Tessia, haven't you, child?" he snorted.

"G-grandpa! It's not like that! He's just..." her voice trailed off at the end, face glowing.

"Hahaha! Anyways! He's going to be under my direct guidance from now on, so make sure to let everyone know that he is not to be trifled with!"

"F-father..."

"ENOUGH! This is not up for discussion! Oh, brat! You're here! Come! We should hurry!" His expression changed into a smile immediately after seeing me.

I nodded and hopped into the carriage, avoiding the frowns that the King and Queen were giving me.

A little into the journey, I asked Grandpa Virion, “Hey Gramps, where are we headed, anyway? You said we were meeting a friend of yours, right?”

“Haha! Gramps eh? Well aren’t you awfully comfortable with me now. Good, good! As for where we’re going, it’s a surprise.” He threw in a wink.

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Tess has fallen asleep with her head leaning against my shoulder. She must have been tired from waking up so early.

“Take good care of her, Art. She grew up in a very lonely environment,” he quietly muttered, a look of compassion filling his eyes as he looked at his sleeping granddaughter.

“What do you mean?”

“Growing up as the only princess of an entire kingdom is very stressful; too much for a child to handle. Growing up with no close friends, it was hard on her. She had gotten hurt too many times by people pretending to befriend her, only to use her for their personal gains. This has made Tessia into someone cold and distant to those around her. Imagine how surprised we all were when we saw you two holding hands,” he continued.

“Yeah, I noticed when I heard her talk to the guards,” I added.

“Arthur. Tessia has shown more expression, more smiles and laughs, now than she ever had growing up; around you, she finally seems more like a child. For that, I thank you.” He patted my other shoulder.

This was the first time Grandpa Virion ever initiated physical contact with me outside of sparring, which caught me by surprise.

The carriage came to a gentle halt before the driver opened our carriage door to inform us of our arrival.

“Hey Tess, we’re here,” I whispered, gently nudging her.

“Mmm...” She eventually stirred awake and we get out of the carriage, arriving at what could only be considered a dainty hut.

“Hey, you old witch! Come out!” Grandpa Virion suddenly yelled while knocking on the door.

Suddenly, the door flew open to reveal a hunched elderly lady with grey hair that seemed like it was struck by lightning and wrinkled eyes that were strangely a mixture of multiple colors, all blending together. Dressed in a simple brown robe, she peered down at me with a studying eye.

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“Took you long enough to get here!” she scowled.

“Hahaha! Arthur! Let me introduce you to Rinia Darcassan. She’s a very special deviant amongst us elves,” Grandpa Virion announces.

“It’s good seeing you again, Virion. Charming as always, little Tessia,” she smiled, patting Tess’s head.

Looking at me, she stuck out her hand. “We finally meet, young Arthur. I am Rinia. A Diviner.”

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Grandpa Virion, Tess, Rinia, and I were currently all situated around a circular table with a jar of water in the middle.

“Umm... Elder Rinia? You said that you were a diviner, correct? I’m a little lost as to what it is you can do. Gramps said that I’d be able to find out if

my parents are okay by seeing you,” I said, staring curiously at the jar of water.

“Kekeke! Gramps, huh? Virion, you’ve really let yourself go if you’re letting youngsters like him call you that,” she snickered.

“Bah! He’s an exception! If any other brat dares to call me something like Gramps, I’ll have them hung upside down and beaten with a cactus!” he grinned back, looking at me.

How painfully descriptive.

Glaring at me, she barked, “Brat! You don’t even know where your parents are, but you want to travel all over Sapin, find them, and then come back to train? You’d be already dead by the time you made yourself back here.”

I looked at Grandpa Virion. Did he tell her? Almost as if he knew what I was thinking, he chuckled. “I didn’t tell Rinia any of this. There isn’t much you can hide from her, but she usually doesn’t bother looking into a person. What made you so nosy, Rinia?”

Gramps said, directing a worried gaze towards the elderly lady.

“You and I both know he’s special. So special, in fact, that there are parts of his life that even I can’t see. Arthur, whatever the beast that passed its will onto you was, it was not an ordinary beast. Limiting it to an SS class wouldn’t give it justice.” She pondered for a bit before continuing. “Enough about that, though. Arthur, you’re here to see your parents, so that’s what I’ll help you do. Close your eyes for a moment and picture your parents. Focus on their appearance and their mana signatures. I’ll take care of the rest.”

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I closed my eyes and imagined the last scene I had of them both together: my father badly wounded and my mother healing him.

“Okay, you can open your eyes now.”

I looked at her to see the color of her eyes swirling. The water was floating out of the jar and swirling around, forming a spiraling disk. Suddenly, I see my parents in the water.

The chair I was sitting on flipped back as I bolted up, leaning as close to the table as possible. I saw my mother and father together, sitting around a dining table. It didn't seem to be our home in Ashber. My mother's face was a bit paler and she was currently saying something to my father. I could see she'd lost a bit of weight, but otherwise looked pretty healthy. And her stomach! It's pretty evident now that she was pregnant by the fairly noticeable bulge of her belly. And my father looked the same! He was wearing some kind of uniform now, though, and was sporting a beard.

I could feel hot tears running uncontrollably down my face at this point, as I didn't dare peel my eyes off of the image of my parents.

They're alive! They're doing okay! They're fine.

“Th-Thank you, Elder Rinia. Thank you truly for showing me this,” I managed a sniffled stammer.

She looked a little uncomfortable at my sincerity and just waved it off.

“Ahem! Let me see where they are now.”

The image zoomed out and I could see the outside of where they were living. Just as I had suspected, it was definitely not our home in Ashber. Zooming out even more, I could see the layout of the city they were staying in.

“It seems like they've made their home in Xyrus. That makes things simpler for us,”

she said, a content look on her face.

Tess, obviously worried about my crying, was patting my back, but her gaze didn't leave the swirling water.

“Art’s parents...” I faintly heard her mumble.

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Grandpa Virion clapped his hands together and stood up.

“Okay! Arthur! Let’s let your parents know that you’re alive!”

According to Grandpa Virion, strict regulations controlled communications between the Kingdom of Elenoir and Sapin. However, Rinia, being a diviner not discovered by the Kingdom of Sapin, allowed us a certain unregulated freedom, in a sense.

“How this process will work is that I will pour some of my innate mana into you, establishing a temporary link. When I give you the signal, start speaking as if you’re talking to your parents. It’s important to know that they will hear your voice inside their heads, so they may not believe what you’re saying at first. Make sure you get them to believe that it really is you that’s speaking to them, and that they’re not going crazy. Remember, we’re just doing this to let them know you’re still alive. I’m going to emit your voice directly into both your parents’ minds. I can’t keep the connection up for long, so say what you need to within two minutes,” she asserted, a serious gaze in her eyes.

Nodding at this, I prepare myself as well.

“Begin... NOW!”

Her whole body began glowing the same color as her eyes, and I could see the same glow spreading to me as well.

Taking a deep breath, I started talking.

“Hi Mom, hi Dad. It’s me, your son, Arthur. You’re probably really surprised that you’re hearing my voice inside your head, huh? Well, there’s

a reason for that. Before that though, I want you to know that I'm alive and safe. Again, I'm alive and well, Mom, Dad.

I managed to survive the fall off the cliff and I'm currently living in the Kingdom of Elenoir with the elves. Please don't tell anyone else this. I don't have much time, so I'll only say the things most crucial. A friend of mine is a deviant like you, mom, except she's a diviner, so I was able to see how you guys are doing just now as well. She is also the one that is allowing you guys to be able to hear my voice. I want to go back to you guys as soon as possible, but I can't right now. No, I'm safe and alive right now, but I have a sort of... er... illness inside my body that I need to get rid of before I am able to go back. Don't worry, as long as I stay here and have the elves treat me, I'm 100% okay.

So please, don't worry. I don't know when I'll be able to talk to you guys like this again,

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but what's important is that I'm alive and I know you guys are as well. Dad, Mom, both of you guys should be hearing my voice right now, so confirm it with each other if you still can't believe this. Remember, don't tell anyone where I am right now. Better yet, just keep it as if I was still dead to make things simpler. It may take months or even years for me to be able to go back, but just be sure that I WILL be going back home. I love you guys *sniff* so much, and I miss you. Stay safe, and Dad, make sure to keep Mom and my baby sibling safe. Mom *sniff*, please make sure Dad doesn't get into trouble. Your son, Art."

I had trouble keeping my eyes open from the tears that continuously poured down. I simply stood silently, rubbing my eyes as I did all I could from breaking down. The glow faded around both of us and Elder Rinia collapsed back into her chair, sweating and pale.

“Elder Rinia, I don’t know how to thank you for this,” I managed to croak out.

“Train well and continue to cherish those close to you, child. That’s how you’ll thank me. Also! Don’t forget to drop in once in a while. This grandma here gets lonely, kekeke~!” she answered with a weak smile.

I gave her a tight hug, making her almost jump. She eventually succumbed to my cuteness and hugged me in return before shooin’ all of us away.

While we were walking out, I noticed Tess pouting a little, looking at my chest.

By the time we arrived back at the castle, it was already dark. A maid greeted us on arrival, but before I had the chance to go back to my room, I saw the king and queen.

The king came up to me first.

“Arthur, I know you overheard what we were saying earlier today, and I apologize for that. Years of being a King has made me a bit old-fashioned and I was unreasonably stubborn on you not belonging here.”

The queen continued for her husband, holding my hands in hers.

“You are now Elder Virion’s first disciple. This gives you more than enough reason for

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all of us to accept you. Even if that fact didn’t exist, you still saved our daughter. Please consider this place your home. I know you miss your parents dearly, but if I can be of any consolation, don’t hesitate to treat me as you would your own mother,” she said, giving me a sincere smile.

“Papa! Mama!...” Tess said with her hands covering her mouth. She then ran up to them and hugged them both.

I smiled back, thanking them as well. They were good people. Good people that were simply looking out for their kingdom.

Smiling behind us, Grandpa Virion nodded at all of us in approval before exclaiming,

“Brat! Training starts tomorrow, so sleep early!”

I woke up from an immense pain covering my body. Cold sweat had already coated my body as the burning feeling intensifies.

“AARGH!” I clutched my body tightly, trying to endure, when the door suddenly swung open and Grandpa Virion ran towards me.

“It’s getting worse...”

He placed both hands on my sternum, where my mana core was located, before starting to emit his own mana into me.

Slowly, the pain subsided and I was left panting, my clothes drenched in sweat.

“T-thank you,” I managed to wheeze out.

Without looking up, he replied, “It’s a bit early, but let’s start training now.”

Looking out the window, I noticed that the sun had yet to even rise. I probably wasn’t going to be able to fall asleep again, so I nodded and followed him out into the courtyard.

Sitting cross-legged, he took a long look at me before explaining, “Until now, you’ve been purifying your mana core and manipulating mana using your mana channels.

While, for normal mages, this method is sufficient, for beast tamers, we can’t rely on

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this approach. Instead, we do something called 'assimilation.'"

I sat down, facing him. My face must've tipped him off that I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Haha! Don't worry, you'll know soon enough. What it essentially is, is integrating the mana from your core directly into your body's bones and muscles, hence the method, assimilation. Unfortunately, throughout the period of assimilating, your mana core won't develop at all, but that isn't the point of this. Once the mana from your new core is absorbed throughout your body, you'll be able to start utilizing whatever power your beast's will had."

So this is what Sylvia meant! Throughout this whole journey through the Forest of Elshire and meeting the royal family and Grandpa Virion, I couldn't help but think that Sylvia had somehow planned all of this out.

"Slowly release the mana out of your core and don't be tempted to use your mana channels. Instead, let it seep into your body and slowly have all of your muscles and bones absorb the mana. This will take time and effort, but throughout this process, your mana core should reject your body less and less," Virion instructed. "There isn't much I can help you with for the first part of your training except making sure your mana is distributed evenly throughout your body and relieving you when your body spasms like earlier."

Training continued on with me meditating, dispersing the mana out of my core and into my body. I had gotten the hang of it after a few days, but I realized how long of a journey this would be. Directing my mana to form a core when I was an infant took a couple of years, but this was doing the exact opposite, except with more mana and the extra step further of assimilating the mana directly into the muscles and bones.

I didn't leave the castle because I wouldn't know when my body would act up again. I was really grateful for Grandpa Virion for sticking by me throughout this time.

Unfortunately for Tess, this left her very little time to play with me. When I wasn't meditating, I was resting in my room, my body aching from being imbued with mana.

However, that didn't stop her from simply barging in and chattering on about her day.

After several weeks of assimilation, my body acted up less frequently and I was allowed to go out into the city. So after promising Tess that I'd go touring around the city of Zestier, I went to sleep.

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Waiting outside my room was an adorably-dressed Tess. She was wearing a white sleeveless sundress and a white sheer cardigan over it. The light pink-colored sun hat she wore over her head was decorated with a pale flower, giving her a very fresh and doll-like appearance.

"Took you long enough! Hurry, let's hurry!" She grabbed my hand, half-dragging me as I fought my aching body to keep up with her pace.

Seeing the city once again didn't distill the amazement I had when I had first arrived at Zestier. As we got off the carriage and started walking, we took time to visit the numerous stalls and stores the city had to offer. While the two of us were met with a lot stares from the fact that a human child was holding hands with their kingdom's only princess, it was a feeling I was used to in my previous life, so it didn't bother me.

What bothered me, however, was that, while most of these gazes only held curiosity, some stares were filled with blatant hostility.

Coming out of the armor shop, I had just moved out of the way for someone when an elven child bumped my shoulder.

“Hmph! Well, if it isn’t the human brat that Elder Virion has taken under. I’ve heard all about you. Gross, I got human germs on my clothes,” he snidely remarked, a look of disgust pasted on his face.

It was fairly obvious by the clothes of this child, who couldn’t be much older than Tess, and the attendants, along with the group of friends following behind him, that he was a noble.

After spending so much time with Tess, I had almost forgotten how immature children were. I couldn’t help but think that, whether they were an elf or a human, spoiled nobles always seemed to act as if they’d been taught out of the same manual.

He then turned to face Tess, his facing transforming into a well-practiced smile as he offered her his hand. “Princess, it is below your level to be with this human brat. Allow me to escort you around,” he urged, expecting Tess to receive his hand.

Not even looking in his direction, Tess linked her arm with mine and coldly retorted,

“Art, let’s go. There is a bug in that direction and I don’t want to accidentally step on it

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with my new shoes.”

As I was pulled away, I glanced back, shooting the noble kid a look of pity, which seemed to infuriate him even more.

“Hold it, brat! I’m not done with you!” he shouted, running up to me and gripping my shoulder.

“I heard you’re pretty talented for a human mage. Around here, I happen to be a pretty well-known genius myself. My mana core has already reached red stage and aside from water manipulation, my mother said that I’ll soon be able to manipulate plants!”

I responded with my most sincere, yet blatantly sarcastic expression of surprise and worship. “Oh, my word! Princess Tessia! It seems we are in the presence of pure genius here. I am not worthy!”

Tess let out a giggle, not even bothering to hide her amusement.

“I’ll be sure to give you proper respect, Lord Genius of the Elves. So if you’ll excuse us...”

As I started leading Tess away, a handkerchief flew past us, landing on the ground.

Turning back, I see the noble brat’s face, red as a tomato, glaring at me as the attendants and friends all let out quiet gasps.

“How dare you initiate a duel with the disciple of Elder Virion! You may be of noble blood, Feyrith, but you should still know your place! Take it back,” Tessia ordered, her eyes narrowed in a glare.

“I’m sorry, Princess, but my father taught me to never let my pride be stomped on.

Arthur, ready yourself for a duel, or retreat with your tail between your legs, knowing that your actions reflect your mentor as well. The choice is yours.” Feyrith puffed his chest, withdrawing a wand from under his cape.

Some of the people nearby had overheard and had already started to gather around us. Tess looked uncertain about all of this, but just nodded her head and took a few steps away from us.

I didn’t want to cause a scene since I was a visitor, but after weeks of stifling

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meditation, my body was actually eager for the chance to fight.

"Princess, please do us the honor of initiating the duel," the noble brat said as he began polishing his black wand with his sleeve.

I could see Tess rolling her eyes as she took another step back. "Let the duel commence."

While my mana core was still in the early stages of dark red, I could feel mana strengthening every fiber of muscle I flexed as I dashed towards Feyrith.

It was over in a second. He was too cocky and didn't even take the necessary precautions to find out whether I was an augments or conjurer, and by the time I was within arm's length, he hadn't even begun his chant.

As my palm sank into his gut, all he managed to let out was a sharp breath of air, forced out of his lungs, before flying back and tumbling on the floor. I was glad that I had used my palm because as soon as my hand made contact, I felt a sturdy chainmail underneath his clothes.

Feyrith's attendants and friends' eyes grew wide as Tess quickly ran to me and pulled me away.

Later, Tess explained to me that, in a duel, there were certain unsaid customs. One of these customs was to let the challenger make the first move. The other was that informal duels between nobles were only a demonstration of magic, not actual fighting. This got a good laugh out of Gramps when he found out, saying that the duels between nobles were utter foolishness and a completely inaccurate way to measure someone's magical prowess.

All in all, what Feyrith had meant when he initiated the duel was to simply take turns showing off each other's respective magic talent.

It was disappointing to realize that the look of shock from everyone around us wasn't from my fighting prowess, but from the fact that I ignored the customs of the duel.

Since then, I chose to stay in the manor most days, keeping myself out of trouble as I lived a rigorous lifestyle that consisted of meditating with Grandpa Virion in the morning, spending a little time with Tess in the afternoon, and training by myself at night. During this time, I sent messages to my parents every once in a while to let them

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know I was still alive and that I miss them dearly.

Like this, three years passed.

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REYNOLD LEYWIN'S POV:

I couldn't believe it.

My son. My son was gone.

"NOOOO! NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO."

Durden had to hold me back before I jumped off the cliff myself to save my son.

I knew it was too late. I knew what could've happened had already happened, but I couldn't just stand still, not doing anything.

“Let me go! My son! He could still be alive. Let me save my son! Please.”

Durden wasn't budging and Adam came to help hold me back, too.

“Please, Rey. You have to hold it together. There's no easy way to tell you this, but it isn't possible for him to have survived that fall.” The always playful and lax Adam had a solemn expression on his face and couldn't even meet my eyes.

“Adam is right. Pull yourself together. Your wife needs you, Rey,” Durden also muttered.

They're right. They're absolutely right. Yet. Why is my body not listening to me? Why can't I go comfort my wife?

“AAAAHHHHHHH!!!” I broke down before everything went black.

Waking up, I noticed Helen holding a wet towel over my head.

“You're finally awake,” she said, a sympathetic smile on her face that lacked confidence.

I ignored her and sat up, burying my face into my hands.

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“This isn't a dream, is it? Please tell me I'm going to wake up to see my boy playing with Jasmine and Adam.”

“...”

“I'm sorry...” were the only words she managed to say before she started sniffing as well.

The flap of the tent opened as Durden made his way inside.

“Reynolds. I can’t begin to imagine how much it must hurt for you, but right now, your wife needs you. She’s blaming herself, Rey. She thinks you hate her for losing your child,” he said, his red eyes evidence that he was having a hard time as well.

“...” Unable to muster up any words in response, I turned away from Durden.

All of a sudden, I felt a sharp jerk as I was pulled back. Just as my eyes caught a glimpse of Durden’s large hand, my vision blurred and a stinging pain throbbed in my cheek where he had smacked me.

“Reynolds! We had to stop Alice from killing herself! This isn’t the time to be moping!

Get off your sorry ass and take care of the one that’s actually alive!” he growled.

This was the first time I had seen the usually composed Durden this infuriated.

I managed a stiff nod, my brain still throbbing from the hit, as I made my way to my wife’s tent.

I spotted my wife curled up under a blanket with Angela by her side, patting her gently.

I gave a meaningful look to Angela. Understanding what I wanted, she simply nodded before excusing herself out of the tent.

“...Alice.”

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“Honey. Can I see my wife’s beautiful face?”

“...child,” I faintly heard her mumble.

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“What was that honey?” I responded, patting her back.

“I killed our child!” She bolted up and turned to face me.

“I killed our son, Reynolds. It was my fault! I-If I wasn’t there, he could’ve dodged that.

He could’ve lived. He sacrificed himself to save me... *sniff*... it was my fault.”

I pulled my wife toward me and held her tight, softly kissing the top of her head over and over.

I kept my eyes tightly shut, keeping myself from crying as she continued sobbing into my chest.

We just sat like that for a while until her sobs turned into dry whimpers.

Hic

“You don’t hate me?” I was barely able to hear her whisper.

“How could I ever hate you? Alice. I love you and I always will.”

Hic *Hic*

“...I miss him so much, Rey.” She began sobbing again.

I clench my jaws, willing myself to stay strong in front of my wife.

“I-I know honey. I miss him, too.”

The rest of the journey was a slow and arduous one. Not physically. No. I felt like even the wild animals knew of our emotional torment as they steered clear of us. Our group advanced in quiet. Any of Adam’s attempts at trying to lighten up the mood was met with a crushing silence. Even the cheerful Angela bore a solemn face throughout the rest of the journey.

Alice and I fell asleep together last night in each other's arms. I managed to console her, and it helped me, as well. I needed an excuse. I was the one that had sent Arthur to protect Alice. I kept trying to find people to blame, but the ones that were actually at fault were already killed. Revenge had already been taken. Now, all I was left with was this dark hole of emptiness and regret. The only thing that was keeping Alice and

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me sane was our unborn child. For that child, my child, I had to endure. I wasn't going to make the same mistake I had made with Arthur. He was only a child, but I'd sent him off to protect my wife against fighters and even a mage. I had no one to blame but myself.

We arrived at the floating city of Xyrus through the teleportation gate with no further complications, as though God was mocking us by saying we've been through enough.

The Twin Horns were supposed to separate from my wife and I from here.

"You guys sure you'll be okay?" Adam gave us a rare concerned look.

Durden added, "We don't mind staying with you for a couple more days. I know you originally came to this city for Arthur, but..." He never finished the sentence.

"It's okay. You guys have your agenda. Alice and I have all of our basic necessities and money to live off of for a couple of weeks. Keep your guys' positions updated in Guild Hall." I waved them off, trying to force a smile.

"Will do. Take care, guys. We'll see each other soon," Durden replied, hugging the both of us.

The girls also gave Alice a warm hug after saying their goodbyes to her. After they left, I turned to my wife, giving her a serious look.

“Alice, what do you say about living here from now on?”

Giving me a confused look, she replied, “What about our home in Ashber? We just got it all fixed up. A lot of our stuff is still there.”

I shook my head at this. “I think it’ll be better for us to have a fresh, new surrounding.

Our home in Ashber has too many memories of Art. I don’t think we’ll be able to get over it if we stay there. We’ll hire some merchants to deliver our stuff from Ashber here to us.”

She looked down as she decided before giving me a small nod. “What about a job? How will we afford to live here? This is a very expensive city to live in, Rey,” she added, a worried look on her face.

For once, I was able to muster up a real smile—a sincere smile that seemed so rare these days. “I know an old friend that lives here. He’s asked me to be his guard

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numerous times years back and we still keep in touch from time to time. He’s a fairly renown merchant in this area and has a large manor. I’m sure he’ll have a place for us to stay. They’re good people, Alice.”

She looked a little doubtful at first, but after arriving at the manor and seeing me hug my old friend, her worries lessened.

“Rey! My friend! The hero who saved my life! What brings you to this little city?” A thin bespectacled man in a suit exclaimed as he let go of me, patting my arms.

Vincent Helstea, around 1.7 meters in height with a thin frame for a body. He was a man of brains, not brawn. Vincent was a normal human, but a very successful one at that. The Helstea House had been in the trading

business for generation. While their family had been on the decline for a few generations, Vincent single-handedly brought his family's assets to an all-new high after building the first Helstea Auction House in Xyrus and later building several auction houses within neighboring cities.

We had met when he was on one of his trips to a more remote city to build an Auction House when he ran into trouble with bandits. I was there with him at the time, fulfilling the escort mission the Guild had assigned me. After saving him, we hit it off pretty well.

The maid that answered the door left after she saw Vincent hugging me. Soon after, his wife and daughter came out as well, curious as to what all the commotion was about.

"Tabitha! Meet my dear friend, Reynolds, and his wife, Alice! Alice, Reynolds, this is my wife Tabitha, and this here lovely lady is my daughter, Lilia," Vincent exclaimed, picking up his daughter. She looked to be the around the same age as Art was, with lovely hazel eyes that reminded me of a kitten and long brown hair, braided. My heart ached as I thought about how beautiful a young lady she'd grow up to be in the future. A future she still had...

Forcing myself away from my dark thoughts, I greeted myself, "Tabitha! It's great to finally meet you. Vince told me so many great things about you during our trip together to Elshire City. What a cute daughter you guys have!"

After my wife introduced herself and exchanged pleasantries with Tabitha, Vincent urged us into the living room to get comfortable.

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"So what brings you here, Rey. Last time you sent me a letter, you said you got yourself settled all the way up in Ashber," he said, handing Alice and me a glass of wine.

I took a deep breath and told them the story through gritted teeth.

“I had no idea. I’m so sorry for your loss,” Vincent managed to mutter. His wife covered her mouth with her hands. “I wouldn’t know what to do if I lost Lilia. Is there anything I can do for you?”

At that, I awkwardly scratched my cheek and asked, “You asked me several times to teach your Auction House’s guards a thing or two about magic. Is that offer still up in the air? If it is, you would be doing me a huge favor. I really just need enough to rent a small house around here and live a simple life. It’s just that I don’t my wife to go back to the old house in Ashber where Arthur was born and raised.”

A big grin appeared on Vincent’s face. “Nonsense! No friend of mine is going to be sleeping in a small hut. As a matter of fact, I was actually looking for someone! We just renovated our Helstea Auction House so it could accommodate three times as many people. With that, we got a fresh new batch of augments recruits that really need some work around the edges. You would be perfect to shape them up a bit, Rey. Can you do me a huge favor and work for me?” He put on a desperate face.

I couldn’t help but chuckle in response; he had just turned around my initial desperate offer into me, doing him a favor. Nodding, I shake his outstretched hand and discussed the deal.

Even though I was restless to start working, Vincent wouldn’t allow it, saying we needed time to get situated in order for me to be in the best state to work. Vincent also firmly insisted that we live with them in the manor. He told us how Tabitha and Lilia were always complaining about this place being too big and empty. Reluctant at first, Alice and I eventually got ourselves situated in the left wing of the manor. Vincent was more than lenient, saying we could have a couple of rooms, in case we want any more babies in the future. Tabitha had to pull her husband away by his ear as he grinned, waving us goodbye.

Another unforeseen blessing was how well Alice and Tabitha hit it off. I was worried she’d be lonely when I started working, but Tabitha had a lot of free time as well and just took care of Lilia, so having Alice around

really brightened up her day; because of this, my wife had great company, too, and a source of distraction. Once work started, I

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was busy training the new recruits. These mages were not the most talented, but they were willing to work hard. After pounding the essentials into their heads, I felt like they'd make a pretty solid team of guards in the course of a few months. Of course, all of the elite mages, both conjurers and augmenters, were attending school at Xyrus Academy, so the ones that didn't want to be Adventurers ended up being hired by rich nobles, like Vincent, as guards, which was also much safer.

It had been a few months now since Alice and I first arrived in Xyrus. During this time, we were able to slowly grow accustomed to the city life. Alice's belly seemed to be getting larger by the day and, while she still had reoccurring nightmares about losing Arthur, having Tabitha and Lilia around really helped her through that. Just getting back home, I was welcomed by the delicious smell of beef stew. Vincent and Tabitha had gone out on a date while Alice promised to watch over Lilia with the maids, so it was just the two of us having a late dinner tonight, with Lilia already tucked in.

"This beef stew looks amazing, Alice. What's the special occasion?" I grinned at her.

She smiled softly. "It's been awhile since I've cooked for you. This used to be your and Art's favorite dish."

Her face turned downcast, but before I had the chance to console her...

'Hi Mom, hi Dad. It's me, your son, Arthur... '

My mind froze. This was Art's voice. No. I was just hearing things. I looked at Alice while the voice continued to talk in my head. Her face was distraught as she began looking around. Was she hearing voices, too?

‘...Again, I’m alive and well, Mom and Dad. I managed to survive the fall off the cliff... ’

What is going on? My son is alive? Kingdom of Elenoir? Illness?

‘...It may take months or even years for me to be able to go back, but just be sure that I WILL be going back home. I love you guys *sniff* so much, and I miss you. Stay safe, and Dad, make sure to keep Mom and my baby sibling safe. Mom, *sniff*, please make sure Dad doesn’t get into trouble. Your son, Art.’

I looked at my wife again.

“You just heard the voice now too, right Rey?” she blurted, her voice edged with

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desperation. “Please, tell me it wasn’t just me that heard his voice.”

“Y-yeah. I just heard Art’s voice,” I replied, unable to still make sense out of all of this.

“H-He’s alive! Honey! Our baby is alive! Oh my goodness...” Alice had fallen to her knees as her voice trailed off into weeping. She was crying while she wore a smile that told me her tears were from joy.

Hell, even I was crying right now. My son was alive! “Our son is alive!!!” I laughed out madly.

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“Hey, Art! Hurry up! We’re going to be late!”

“AAAGGHHHH!! Tess! Stop! I give! I GIVE!” I cried out.

Tess finally got off of me, letting go of the leg lock she had in a firm grip.

“Can’t there be a gentler way of waking me up, Tess?” I grumbled, massaging the feeling back into my leg.

“It’s getting harder and harder to wake you up in the morning! I have to do something, right? Besides, you should be grateful that such a pretty lady is waking you up every morning.” She fluttered her eyes at me.

“I find the maids here plenty pretty, thank you very much,” I muttered under my breath.

She must’ve heard, because that earned me a firm squeeze on the side.

Where did the shy Tess that was too scared to sleep alone in the tent go; the sweet Tess that begged me not to go? Bring her back! I liked her better!

Something I realized in my three years of living in Elenoir was that elves awakened much earlier than humans did. Whereas the average age for a human is around thirteen years old, elves awoke around the age of ten.

Tess had awakened fast, even for an elf. It happened last year, and boy, did she awaken with a bang. It wasn’t as big as when I had first awakened, but she had managed to destroy her room upstairs, fall down, and create a small crater from the implosion in the kitchen right below. Since then, she’s been joining me in training with Gramps. All I can say is, since awakening, she’s become a lot more confident and bold, in more bad ways than good. She knew how strong my body was, so she had no hesitation in using me as her sandbag as she tried new spells that she learned from Grandpa Virion and other conjurer teachers. What she just didn’t seem to get even after all of my cries was

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that I still felt pain, dammit!

As for me, today was a very special day because, after three years, I was finally able to complete the assimilation of mana into my body. It was almost my birthday, so while Tess had turned nine a couple months ago, I'll be finally turning eight. During this time, I wasn't allowed to absorb any mana from my surroundings and was only allowed to use my innate mana formed from my mana core to spread it into my body. Today was the final step that took place once a beast tamer finished his assimilation.

I skipped showering and just changed into a more presentable robe, tucking the stone into my robe before heading out into the courtyard with Tess.

"Finally awake now, eh Art? How did your wife wake you up today? Haha!" Grandpa Virion mused as he sipped his tea on the small table outside.

"Ugh, wife? Where? I didn't know you could marry demons. You're turning her into a monster, Gramps," I groaned.

Luckily, Tess wasn't able to overhear as she came outside just moments after.

"She's going to grow up into a fine woman, Art. Better sweep her off her feet before it's too late," he chuckled, lifting his teacup in a toast.

Tess just blushed at that and elbowed my side.

"AGGH!" Why? What did I do?

"Hahaha! Art! Are you ready? Today is finally the day. After this, you'll be a true beast tamer, not like those lucky adventurers that just have a Beast's will," he emphasized, arms crossed.

I gave him a firm nod while Tess headed to the table Gramps was sitting at to watch.

It wasn't much of a ceremony. All it consisted of was Gramps exerting a large amount of mana into my core. This would trigger a large surge of mana that I would have to direct and spread into my body.

"Do you remember the basic phases of beast tamers, Art?" he quizzed.

I recited the basics that Grandpa Virion pounded into me these past years.

"All beast

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tamers have a different number of forms that they can will their bodies into. The number of forms depends on the strength of the Beast's will that is left in the mana core. The first phase that all beast tamers have is 'Acquire.' In this phase, the Tamer can utilize a small portion of the inherent ability that their beast has. The second stage is 'Integrate,' where the Tamer's body wholly infuses with the Beast's will, allowing a much better control over their beast's inherent abilities."

"Correct! The phases that the beast tamers are able to unlock simply shows how much they can utilize their Beast's will. The stronger the beast, the harder it is, but at the same time, if the tamer can't get insight, then it is also impossible to get past the first phase. One thing to note, however, is that, not always is the Integrate stage more powerful than the Acquire stage. The Acquire phase is tapping into a specific inherent ability of your beast's while Integrate is a much more all-encompassing power-up using your Beast's will," he reminded, his face deathly serious.

"While I didn't tell you earlier, now that you are about to become a true beast tamer, you should know the differences in how a beast tamer's will is acquired. If the beast is killed and his mana core is extracted with its will still intact, a mage can absorb the will and try to gain insights. That mage would be considered a forged tamer. While it is a lot easier and straightforward to become a forged tamer, the probability of gaining insight is very rare and limited. One of the reasons it took me so long to be able to break into the second phase was because I am a forged tamer. I consider

myself lucky to even be able to break into the second stage, though. Arthur, you are one of the extremely rare legacy tamers; where the beast willingly imparted its will onto you.”

Continuing on, he explained, “Art, my first phase doesn’t really make me that much faster, but I’m able to erase a bit of my presence and blend myself into the shadows.

You haven’t seen my second phase, right? Watch carefully. It took me over ten years for me to make a breakthrough into this phase.”

Feeling a powerful surge of mana surrounding his body, I couldn’t help but involuntarily cringe. All of a sudden, the mana around his body seeped back into him and my eyes widened.

Grandpa’s skin turned pitch black. Even the whites of his eyes became black while his irises turned sharp and glowed yellow. His tied white hair became unbound and was also a shiny black color. The aura that surrounded him made me shudder and take a step back.

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“This is the Integrate phase. I’m going to sneak up behind you. Pay attention,” he growled, his voice much raspier than before.

Was it really sneaking up if he tells me... was what I was thinking when he disappeared from my vision. I couldn’t feel his presence at all but I when looked behind me as I had been told to do, his finger was already pressed against my jugular as he looked down at me with his glowing yellow eyes.

Fast. It seemed like instant teleportation, but I knew it wasn’t by the skid mark from his initial position. It was speed that even I couldn’t keep up with. Not even close. No.

The scary part wasn’t even his insane speed. It was his lack of presence. Even directly behind me, I couldn’t sense where he was.

He turned back to normal, his face slightly flushed as Tess began clapping as if this was a show.

“Whew! Using that form always takes a toll on me. After training with it for a couple decades, I’m able to keep the form on for a bit less than an hour. During my Acquire phase, I am simply channeling a small portion of my Beast’s will and I’m able to borrow the speed and stealth of the shadow panther. However, with my Integrate phase, not only did my speed and stealth rise, so did my senses, to keep up.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Good! Let’s begin the ceremony,” he replied, clasping his hands together.

We stood face to face, only an arm’s length apart. Tess was now leaning forward in excitement, as we were about to start.

“Just let your mana come out freely. Don’t try to control anything. I’ll restrain you if necessary, so it’s crucial that you keep a relaxed state of mind and rouse the particles of mana you assimilated all these years,” he instructed.

After a nod in response, he then began exerting mana into my core, flooding my core with his mana along with mine.

Instantly, I began feeling a warm sensation, like a hot gust of air was flowing in and out of my pores.

As I felt my body reaching its limit, a loud explosion startled me out of my

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concentration, only for me to see Gramps getting thrown back and Tess falling back on her chair and rolling back as well.

An unbearable pain immediately surged from my body, as if my very skeleton was trying to crawl out of my skin. Without even the strength to

scream, my vision darkens.

I welcomed the darkness because I knew it would relieve me of my pain.

Waking up back in my bed, I sat up, feeling surprisingly refreshed. Sitting to my side, laying her head down on my legs, was Tess. Looking at her sleeping like this, it reminded me of when I had escorted her back home after saving her from the slave traders.

Grandpa walked in soon after, and he sat down on the other side of the bed, not bothering to wake up his slumbering granddaughter.

“How do you feel, brat?” His lips curl up into a half grin.

“I should be asking you that, Gramps. I saw you get sent flying; even Tess was knocked back.”

He just let out an embarrassed chuckle. “I have to admit, I wasn’t expecting that great of a force. I know you probably have a good reason for not even telling me what kind of beast gave you its will, but I’ll ask just one more time. What sort of beast gave you its will?”

Scenes of my time with Sylvia ran through my mind, one of them being her telling me never to tell anyone I had met her. However, Virion was probably one of the few people I could actually trust, and he had the right to know. If it wasn’t for him, I probably wouldn’t be alive.

“...Well, using her own words, it was what we call a dragon that had passed her will to me.”

A thick silence filled the room as Virion’s face was frozen in the same stricken expression he had when I told him. He began mumbling to himself, the only words I could make out being ‘possible’ and ‘never happened.’

“D-Dragon...” he managed to wheeze out, his eyes staring blankly at me.

“Dear lord... a D-Dragon Tamer. In all my life, I’ve never thought I’d be able to see the

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birth of a Dragon Tamer... I-I'm even the one that trained him! HAHAHA!
A Dragon Tamer!"

Tess woke up from the now senile Virion and looked at him, confused.

He suddenly grabbed both my shoulders and looked at me intently. "You did right in keeping this a secret. Do not tell anyone else. This power of yours has to be kept a secret until you have the strength to protect yourself and those around you."

"I'm beginning to believe that more and more, Gramps," I responded seriously.

"Good! Although I would like to know the whole story, I am more than satisfied with what you've told me for now." He smiled back.

"What is it, Gramps? What did Art tell you? Uu... not fair, keeping secrets from me."

Tess started pouting at this point.

"Hahaha, you'll know when the time is right, little one. Arthur! I have good news. The teleportation gate that is supposed to open in two years will be opening early. There is a tournament that will be held in the city of Xyrus in four months. This tournament will be a very important event for the future because both the dwarves and elves are sending youths as representatives for both the tournament and as preliminary students to your human academy. During the tournament, we can sneak you back into Sapin without the humans knowing at that time," Gramps exclaimed with a smile on his sharp face.

"Really Gramps? I can go home soon?" I shot out of bed.

I would finally be able to see my parents again! I had been sending messages to my parents every once in a while through Elder Rinia, but after

seeing them through the water divination technique, I wasn't able to see them again.

"Y-you're going to be leaving soon, Art?" Tess asked, her face crestfallen.

"Yeah. I have to meet my family soon. Don't worry though! I'll visit you again! And maybe you can come visit me in Sapin!" I said, hoping to cheer her up.

"We still have four months, Arthur! Until the day the teleportation gates open, I expect you to train harder than before, brat! Your mana core hasn't developed at all these past three years from the assimilation you had to do. Don't focus on only training your

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Beast's will. That should only be used as a trump card. Understood?"

He was right. Although I had yet to activate even the Acquire phase of my dragon will, I knew that using it would only bring unwanted attention. I shouldn't use my Beast's will, if possible.

Continuing, Grandpa slapped my back and said, "Now! Take a bath and then rest. You reek of something rotten, brat. Little one, let's leave Arthur alone so he can recuperate."

I noticed Tess still looking depressed by the sudden news of my leaving. Growing up and living with her for three years had given us a bond that was close to siblings, and while she was only nine years old, the fact that she was already showing signs of blossoming into a beautiful woman did make me feel a twinge of regret that I wouldn't be here with her as she grew up.

"Tess! Cheer up okay? I'll still be around for a few more months and even after I leave, it's not going to be permanent. I hope you can someday come and meet my parents, too." I gave her a sincere hug.

“Eeep! W-What are you—?!” I can almost see the steam coming out of her head as she turned bright red. Suddenly, she pushed me away and ran out.

“Ah! Youth! Haha, sleep well, brat!” he chuckled, shaking his head while closing the door behind him.

Was Tess going through puberty already?

I hopped back into bed, feeling too lazy to take a shower right now.

“I’ll just lay down for a little and then take shower,” I muttered aloud.

Rustle *Rustle*

I wonder if it’s windy tonight. I usually didn’t hear the rustling of leaves.

Crack

Okay... that was an unusual sound.

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I sat up to look around, trying to locate where the sound is coming from.

Crack *Crack*

I turned my gaze towards my robe, hanging on the chair.

“Kyu~” “Kyu~”

Kyu?

My robe was making “kyu~” sounds? My brows furrowed as I tried to assess what’s going on.

Crack! “Kyu~!”

The stone!

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I jumped out of my bed and carefully rummaged through my robe to locate the gem that Sylvia had entrusted me with.

"H-haha... Holy shit..." I breathed out as I fell back on my butt, staring at what used to be the rainbow-colored gem.

"Kyu~!"

The stone wasn't a gem...

It was an egg!

And what used to be an egg was now something that I couldn't put into one word.

The first thing that had come to mind was that it was a dragon. It looked sort of like a dragon to me, but at the same time, it didn't. It was all black. It kind of reminded me of a small kitten, but with scales. It was sitting on all fours, studying me with its head tilted to one side. The sclera that would usually be white in the human's eyes was black, like Grandpa Virion when he uses his second form, except its irises were a bright red instead of yellow. The pupils were sharp slits that would normally make it look menacing, but with the body of something akin to a small feline animal, it just looked adorable. The most noticeable difference between a dragon like Sylvia and this little...

thing was that it had two horns on its head. The horns looked identical to the illusion that Sylvia had embodied before she revealed to me that she

was a dragon. They curved outward around its head and then, sharpened into a point in the front.

Its head was shaped like a cat's, but the snout was a just a little bit more pointed, otherwise the same. The tail, though, looked exactly like Sylvia's tail. It was a reptilian tail that had two red spikes at the end. Along the spine of this hatchling were also small red spikes that matched the color of its eyes. It didn't have wings, but where the wings should be located were, instead, two small bumps.

I could see that its belly didn't have scales, though; it looked sort of leathery.

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The newly-hatched creature suddenly let out a toothless yawn, toppling on its back after losing balance.

And in response, I was flushed with the overwhelming urge to embrace this creature.

"Kyu?" It locked its sharp eyes on me with intelligence that didn't match its appearance.

"H-hi there, little fella, I'm Arthur." I stretched my hand out towards it as if it were a dog that needed to know my scent.

"KYU!" It jumped off of the chair and onto my lap, gazing up at me.

I could feel my hands twitch as I suppressed the urge to squeeze it. Unlike the majesty and fearsomeness that Sylvia had, this creature was dangerous in a different sense.

Unable to hold in the urge, I carefully petted the adorable menace. The scales were surprisingly soft and the red spikes that ran down its back felt

like rubber. I guess young animals, whether humans or monsters, were all squishy and soft. It started purring, closing its eyes.

I could feel the tension on my face melt as I let out a soft laugh. “Hehe...”

It rolled onto its back, asking for a more thorough rub. The belly felt like a very soft leather, making it very smooth to rub. I took a closer look at its claws and found it interesting that they looked closer to paws than actual claws. The only thing that was hard were its horns, which were surprisingly sharp as well. I couldn’t help but compare them to the beak a bird would use to crack itself out of its shell.

“Aren’t you just a cute lil fella?” My smile widened while petting this adorable newborn, to the point where it seemed intoxicating.

After a little bit, I couldn’t help but think of what to name it, which made me realize I didn’t even know the gender of this mysterious creature.

“Kyu~!” Suddenly, the newborn shot its tongue out and licked the underside of my left forearm.

“Ah!” I reflexively tried to move my arm back from the scorching sensation, but before I could, a glowing black light began enveloping my arm.

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The prickling pain subsided fairly quickly, so I just waited. The creature pulled its tongue back, revealing a black marking on my forearm.

It looked a lot like the tribal markings that covered Sylvia before she passed on her will to me, but the shape of this pattern was that of a wing. Just one open wing, but it was made up of several dashes and sharp curves that branched out, making it look very intricate and mysterious.

I’m only eight, but I already had a tattoo. I’m such a rebel.

‘...Mama~?’

The creature looked up at me with its mouth closed.

What? I obviously heard a voice just now.

‘Mama?’ This time, I heard it clearly in my head.

Was this... telepathy?

Shaking my head helplessly, I responded vocally, “I guess I’m your mother. But I’m a boy, so you should call me papa.”

‘Papa!’ It suddenly jumped up and licked my nose.

I’m a rebel with a tattoo and a child.

After communicating with the creature for a bit, I had come to realize a few things. I guess after the mark had appeared on my forearm, a sort telepathic connection was established. The voice I heard in my head from the creature sounded like a girl’s, so I decided to name her Sylvie after her real mother.

“Syeevy?” she responded with her head tilted.

Picking her up and bringing her close to my face, I smiled at her, “That’s right! Your name is Sylvie.”

She nuzzled her nose to mine while closing her sharp eyes.

Another thing I realized was that Sylvie had a pretty high intellect for a newborn. She

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already seemed to have the mental capacity of a toddler. While we communicated telepathically, I knew she wasn’t necessarily talking to me in English, but I just understood it as that. It was a very odd feeling, not

knowing the words she was actually saying but knowing what she meant. Besides simple words like “papa”, most of the thoughts she communicated came through as emotions. I was able to get the gist of what she meant by how she felt.

“Okay, Sylvie! I need to wash now. Do you want to come with me?” I said while setting her down.

“Kyu?” She tilted her head again while she looked up at me. I felt like she was asking me what “wash” was, so I just laughed and took her with me.

Getting into the shower, she seemed to cry out ‘NOOOOOOOO’ as she wailed a shrill

“KYUU!”

“I guess you don’t like water that much, do you Sylvie?” I chuckled, setting her down and out of the shower.

Sylvia shook herself off like a wet dog and plopped down on the floor next to the shower, her tail wagging, observing me as I finished washing up.

Her behavior sort of reminded me of a mix between a dog and a cat. Never would I imagine her lineage to be that of a mighty dragon. Of course, this was assuming that she was actually Sylvia’s child.

That got me thinking though.

Was Sylvie really a dragon? She sure looked kind of like a baby dragon...

Why was she completely black when Sylvia was pure white? What baffled me the most was the fact that Sylvie had horns eerily similar to that of the horned, demon king illusion that Sylvia was at first, and also to that of the demon that confronted her.

I got out of the shower and dried myself off. No use thinking about all of this now; how was I going to explain this to Gramps and Tess, though?

As I got out of the bathroom, Sylvie toddled behind me, 'kyu'ing me to not leave her behind.

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I gathered up the pieces of the shell that Sylvie came out from and set it aside. Then I wrapped the feather that encased the stone around my forearm to cover the marking that little Sylvie had left.

Four months. In four months, I would be able to see my parents. I wonder if they'd still recognize me.

Sylvie must've felt the longing emotion for my parents because she cuddled in close to my face and licked my cheeks.

"Thanks little Sylv." Petting her horned head, I fell asleep.

"KYAAAAAAA!"

"What is it? What happened? Who's there?" I jumped up on my bed, using my pillow as a makeshift sword, bed hair ablaze.

"Omygosh! What is this? It's so CUTE! Kyaa!"

I turned my attention to Tess who was holding onto the squirming Sylvie.

"Kyu!!" she cried. 'Papa, help!'

Letting out a defeated breath, I fell back into bed.

Come back, my beautiful sleep...

"Her name is Sylvie and she just hatched from her shell yesterday. You should let go of her, though. It looks like she doesn't like being strangled," I muffled through the pillow that I'd covered my head with.

It was too early in the morning.

Sylvie had finally freed herself from Tess's grasp and was glaring at her while she hid herself behind me.

"Grrrrr..." Sylvie let out a high-pitched growl.

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"Don't worry Sylv, she's a friend," I said while petting her head, giving up on going back to sleep.

"She's adorable!" Tess was literally drooling over my cautious hatchling. I could see hearts coming out of her eyes as she inched herself closer to us, her hands twitching lewdly like a predator's.

"Okay, now you just look scary, Tess. Get out of my room so I can change," I instructed while pushing the perverted princess out of my room.

I changed into a loose robe and pants. As I was putting on my shoes, Sylvie jumped onto my head and nestled herself, hitching herself a ride.

"Kyu!" She sure sounded happy.

I walked downstairs, saying good morning to the confused and shocked maids that couldn't take their eyes off the top of my head.

They all ended up having the same expression as Tess, though. I ended up having to pick up my pace as I started fearing for our safety.

"Gramps! We're here!" I shouted at Grandpa Virion who was sipping tea while reading something.

Turning his head, he smiled, "Ah! Art you're here! Why was Tess fussing about some sort of pet that..."

His cup dropped when he noticed the horned black lump sitting on my head.

“Th-That’s...” He continued to stutter something incomprehensible.

“What is that?” He finally managed to ask, his eyes never leaving the top of my head.

“Er... I think she’s something like a dragon, although I’m not entirely sure myself,” I responded unconfidently.

“Kyu?” I could tell Sylvie was cautious of Virion through our mental link.

Tess came through the door into the courtyard, practically bouncing up and down.

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“You said it’s a dragon? But it's so cute! Art! Can I hold her? Can I? Can I?” she begged, eyes sparkling.

“Grrr~” Sylvie started hissing at her mortal enemy as her claws started stabbing into my scalp.

“AH ow ow OWOW! Sylvie your claws!” I tried peeling her off my head, but she wouldn’t budge.

Grandpa Virion, who was half-dazed, still trying to make sense out of the creature on my head, finally spoke up. “If that really is a dragon, how did you come across an egg?

How did you get it to hatch?”

“The dragon that left me her will entrusted me with a stone that I thought was just a valuable gem. I didn’t even realize what it actually was until it hatched. What do you mean by get it to hatch?” I was confused now as well.

“Supposedly, dragon’s eggs, assuming it really is one, aren’t able to hatch just through the passage of time. It is said that the dragon inside must feel that something capable of protecting and loving it was close by in order for it to hatch. Even then, there must be a very close bond between them,” he explained.

Trying to think of what might have triggered the hatching, I almost immediately came to the conclusion.

“Activating the will, Gramps! I think that’s what made her come out!” I exclaimed.

He scratched his chin, slowly nodding. “That is a viable explanation. The draconic races haven’t been seen for hundreds of years, with only limited records of them, so I can’t say for sure. No use thinking about it now, though! Just be sure to keep the hatchling close by at all times. While it does look very much like a creature of the draconic races, I would be one of the only few that would be able to make that connection. Most people wouldn’t know that creature was a dragon, so it should be fine by just feigning it off as a sort of rare mana beast.”

After that matter was settled, I placed Sylvie on the ground beside me while I began training.

The next step in my training for the next four months would be learning to utilize the power of Sylvia’s will that she left me, as well as condensing my mana core into the

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next stages.

“Accessing the first phase is simple, yet may take a lifetime if comprehension of your Beast’s will does not come naturally. While your mana core is only dark red, your body right now should already be beyond that of a dark orange stage mage. After the ceremony, you should feel a

small area inside of your mana core that holds the will's power. That is where your Beast's will is stored. Accessing the Acquire stage should occur through your own learning, not through being taught. From my experience, the best way to trigger your Beast's will is to continuously be in combat."

"Makes sense to me," I replied, already stretching my body.

"Good! Then let's fight!" he instructed with a confident smirk on his face.

The days went by quickly for me as I was completely immersed in training. I was able to access my first phase but I wouldn't be able to use it in an actual fight until I gained more control over it. Virion also taught me how to conceal my Beast's will so other mages wouldn't notice. After the assimilation, the speed of my mana cultivation went through leaps and bounds.

During this time, there didn't seem to be any changes in Sylvie except that she had gotten a little more intelligent. Her vocabulary was still limited, but it was a lot easier for us to understand each other. I also went out together with Tess a lot. She had dragged me out with her during any free time we had, trying to make as many memories as possible before I left. Like that, the four months that seemed so far away had now passed.

Dressed in a simple olive-green long-sleeved shirt and black pants with the feather wrapped around my forearm, I came out of my room.

"Arthur! Remember to take care! We'll find some way to contact and update you. Take this with you so you can navigate through the Forest of Elshire if you're ever in the area. Or maybe you can just find another princess to lead you back." He winked while handing me a small, silver oval compass.

"Uuu... Grandpa!!!"

"OUCH! Little one! It was a joke!" Grandpa Virion yelled while rubbing his side.

“While Alduin and Merial will be going in a separate carriage as the heads of this

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kingdom, Tess and I won't be going. This will be the last time we'll see each other for now. Until next time, Arthur!" He grabbed me in a strong hug, almost knocking Sylvie off of my head.

"I'll miss you, Art! Remember to come visit again! Uu~ don't go chasing after human girls, okay? Promise me, okay?" She sniffled, tears lining her eyes.

I hugged my dear friend and patted her head as well. "We'll see each other again! You better be stronger than me the next time we meet, Tess! With Gramps teaching you, you have no excuse!"

She gave me a feeble nod, unable to form words because of her constant sniffing.

I waved goodbye to the both of them and followed behind Merial and Alduin after they gave me a sympathetic smile. I hadn't really gotten the chance to spend much time with the King and Queen, but we were more comfortable with each other now. I hoped that next time, I would be able to grow closer to them.

I got into the carriage that the elf representatives were taking, while the king and queen were escorted into a separate carriage.

"Well, look who it is! If it isn't the human brat! Did the royal family finally kick you out of the kingdom?" an elf boy dressed in a very decorated purple robe smirked.

"Uh... I'm sorry, but do I know you?" I felt like I knew who this elf was, but I couldn't quite place my finger on where we had met. Meanwhile, Sylvie was growling, pointing her horns in his direction.

“I’m the noble you mercilessly attacked while defying the customs of the duel!” He bolted up angrily, pointing an accusing finger at me.

It suddenly clicked. “You’re the bug I sent tumbling!” I yelled out in realization, a bit louder than I had meant to.

“Y-you dare...?!” His face turned bright pink as his ears twitched profusely in anger while a few elves behind him desperately tried to cover their snickering.

“Aha sorry, sorry! I didn’t mean to say that. I never did learn your name though,” I chuckled, extending a hand to him.

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Face still red and trying to preserve as much of the little dignity he had left, he rejected my handshake and declared in a pompous tone, “My name is Feyrith Ivsaar III, descendent of the noble Ivsaar family! You may have won while we were both children, but were we to duel again, I would win easily.”

A young elf girl that looked a few years older than Feyrith piped in, saying, “You can just call him Feyfey like we do.”

“D-Don’t tell him that!” Face turning an even darker shade of red, Feyfey turned his head away from me and took a seat.

I sat down next to Feyfey and gave him a sympathetic pat on his shoulders that were slumped in defeat.

As our carriage went into the teleportation gate, we were greeted by the now familiar sensation of being in the middle of a fast-forwarding film.

“We have arrived in Xyrus!” The driver announced.

Taking a quick peek out, I noticed we were surrounded by a parade of people all politely clapping at our entrance. This tournament was supposed

to be one of the biggest turning points throughout the continent. It wasn't just gathering all of the gifted youths together, but also building a future where they could also learn under one roof. It was an exciting venture that the leaders of the continent were taking, but also a scary one that would also, no doubt, be filled with dispute and hostility.

The driver pulled the carriage close to a small gap between two buildings after passing through the crowd and signaled to me in the back that this would be the best time to leave without being noticed.

I said bye to Feyfey and the rest of the representatives and wished them luck. Feyfey merely whipped his head away, but also made a slight waving gesture. Jumping off the carriage with Sylvie still on my head, I made my way through the alleyway as I tried remembering the home my parents were staying in.

After around an hour of making my way around, I finally managed to find the huge manor where my parents were supposed to be residing.

"We're home Sylv. We're finally home," I muttered shakily under my breath.

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"Kyu?" she said as if to say, 'I thought we were at home before.'

I took careful steps walking up the flight of stairs and took one deep breath. Dusting off my shirt and pants I knocked on the giant double doors.

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It was a strange feeling—being more nervous now, meeting my family, than when I first appointed king while in the midst of the most powerful people in the world.

“Whew~ let’s do this, Sylvie.”

“Kyu!” she responded, my excitement spreading to her.

The dull sound of metal clanging on metal rang surprisingly loudly.

Unexpectedly, I could hear the faint pitter-patter sounds followed by a childish voice.

“Coming~!”

A maid opened the door together with a little girl. Immediately upon seeing me, she hid behind the maid.

The maid looked at me curiously, evidently surprised to see an eight-year-old knocking on the door of a noble’s estate.

“Ahem, nice to meet you. My name is Arthur Leywin. I was informed that my family is currently residing in this manor. Do you mind if I speak to them?” I give a slight bow, Sylvie rocking on my head.

Before the confused maid could even respond, I heard an all too familiar sound in the background.

“Eleanor Leywin! There you are! You have got to stop running to the front door every time someone...” My mother stopped mid-sentence and dropped a small bowl of what looked to be food for... my sister.

I look down to see the girl with dazzling brown eyes, looking at me with innocent curiosity. Her light, ash brown hair shimmered with a much prettier quality than Father’s, but I knew who she had gotten the color from. Her hair was tied into two pigtails on the sides of her head above her ears.

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I struggled to peel my eyes away from my little sister and turned to face my mother.

My vision going blurry as tears filled my eyes, I said the one thing I knew she was waiting to hear.

“H-Hi Mom. I’m home.” I gestured with a small, awkward wave, not knowing what to do if she couldn’t recognize me.

Fortunately, my fear didn’t come true and she raced towards me at a speed I swear was faster than Grandpa Virion’s, but that might’ve just been because of my blurry vision.

“Oh, my baby! Arthur!!” She arrived in front of me and collapsed on her knees, her arms around my waist, gripping with all her strength, afraid that I might disappear again if she let go.

“You are alive! The Voice... I knew it was you! *sniff* You’re back now! Yes, you’re home now. Arthur, my baby!” That was all she managed to sputter out before breaking down into a bawl.

I couldn’t even manage a complete sentence before I shut my lips tightly in order to hold back my sobs.

I couldn’t help but think while my head was buried in my mother’s shoulder: you could be an all-powerful, immortal tyrant, but when you are in front of your loved ones, the ability to control emotions betray you.

I kept repeating in half-gurgled sentences that I was alive and that I was home, that I wasn’t leaving. My mother was a flurry of emotions. She was happy that I was back and alive, she was mad that I couldn’t come back sooner, she was sad that I had to be away from them, and how hard it must have been for me all at the same time.

At one point, Eleanor walked to us and started patting Mother’s back. “Mama. There, there. Don’t cry.” But after unsuccessfully comforting her, she began crying as well.

“Arthur!” I turned my head, face still wet with tears, to see outside, the sprinting figure of my father drenched in sweat. I guess the maid had told him I was back.

He didn’t stop as he reached us and simply slid on his knees, hugging all of us as we almost toppled over.

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“Arthur! My son! Look how big you are. Oh my God! You’re back, you’re back!” My father was cupping my head in his hands to get a better look at my face. He broke down while placing his large hand on the back of my head, bringing my forehead to touch his.

Our little family reunion continued on. My mother sobbed uncontrollably, embracing me, and my oblivious little sister cried with her as my father and I just looked at each other with tears in our eyes, all of us glad that we were finally together.

Eventually, we had all managed to settle down.

We sat on a couch, my mother right beside me with Eleanor on her lap. Father was sitting on a chair he pulled up, facing me, his elbows on his knee as he leaned forward.

Mother was holding my hands and still teared up every time she got a look at my face.

“Are you okay now? Did you at least eat three meals a day? You slept while dressing warmly everyday, right? Oh, my baby. Look how big you are now.” Tears escaped her eyes as she squinted and smiled.

She stroked my hair as she planted a soft kiss on the crown of my head. “Thank God you’re back. I’m so happy,” she whispered, her voice still trembling.

Eleanor was looking curiously at both Sylvie and I while the baby dragon was sitting up next to me, attentively observing the three unfamiliar humans.

My father was looking at Sylvie with a curious expression as well, but he didn't mention her. Turning his gaze to me, his eyes softened and he kept shaking his head, repeating how big I was now. It must be a pretty fulfilling yet miserable feeling for a parent to see how big his son had gotten but not being there with him the whole time to witness it.

"Ellie, say hi to your big brother. He was away for a while, but he'll live together with us from now on. Come on, say 'hello.'" My mother gently urged my sister.

"Brother?" She tilted her head, reminding me of a confused Sylvie.

She cupped her hands over my mother's ear and whispered something inaudible.

"Haha yes, that big brother. The one I always told stories about. He's the one."

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My sister's eyes started sparkling as she looked back to me. I couldn't help but now wonder what stories Mother had told her.

"Hai Brother~!" She beamed, waving both of her little hands at me.

"Hello, Eleanor. It's nice to meet you... sister." I laughed, patting her head in response.

Father spoke up now. "Arthur, we were devastated after that incident, and we barely believed it when you communicated to us through our heads. Tell me, how'd you survive the fall?"

It took a while for me to explain everything from the beginning. I withheld some information that I thought might not be good to tell them just yet. I explained to them that I subconsciously wrapped myself in a protective layer of mana and I was lucky enough to hit a bunch of branches on the cliff before landing in a stream. From there on, I told them about meeting Tess and how she was almost kidnapped. After saving her, she led me to her Kingdom and I stayed there.

“You said something about an illness that kept you from coming back sooner. What was all that about? Are you cured now?” My mother chimes in, a look of concern on her face.

Shaking my head, I explain, “You don’t need to worry about that anymore. I guess there was a sort of instability in my mana core that made it so I had episodes of pain. It was really bad at first, but luckily, there was an elder that knew how to cure it. The process was slow but he assured me it wasn’t threatening if treated consistently.”

Relief replaced the prior look of worry and she silently patted my head again.

“So what’s the story with this little friend of yours?” My dad just chuckled, finally bringing Sylvie up.

“Haha, while I was traveling, I stumbled into a mana beast’s den. It was only the mother and she was badly injured. A little bit after I arrived, she died. While I was looking around, it seemed like she was guarding something so I picked it up, thinking it was something valuable, but I didn’t know it was an egg. She hatched only a couple of months ago so she’s still a baby. Say hi to Sylvie.”

I picked her up, holding her body so her limbs dangled like a kitten’s.

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“Kyu~!” she purred, as if saying hi to everyone.

I didn't exactly tell my family a lie when I said this, but I had already promised myself to tell them everything only when I was older and more capable.

I then asked them to update me on everything that happened to them after we had separated. The only thing I was able to tell from seeing them through the water divination the first time was that they lived here in Xyrus, but nothing more, so I was exceptionally curious.

After Father explained what happened since then, my mother chimed in. "That's right!

The Helstea family had gone on a trip but they should be arriving back today. They're going to be so surprised when they see you, Art!"

I turned to face my mother. She hadn't changed much since I last saw her. The only thing that I did notice was that she'd lost a bit of weight and was slightly paler in complexion. My heart ached since I knew this was caused from stress and depression after losing me. Father's body was actually much more built now. Coupled with his beard, he looked a lot more rustic than he had before. I guess working as an instructor for the Helstea Auction House guards had gotten him in shape as well.

"Dad. What color is your mana core now?" I asked while Sylvie made her place back on the top of my head, tail swishing in content.

A confident grin emerged from his face as my father proudly replied, "Your old man broke through from the light red stage a couple years back and is a dark orange mage."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. At the age of early thirties, my father was doing pretty well for himself. The average mage that didn't attend school usually stagnated at the light red stage, maybe dark orange if they were lucky. Of course, it was different for the elites who had a much purer lineage and had access to better resources, but for a standard mage, my father was doing well.

He then asked me, leaning closer, “I bet you only asked me so you could brag yourself.

Let’s hear it, what stage are you at now?”

Scratching my cheek, I mumbled, “...light red.”

My father had already been leaning forward on his chair, but after hearing that, he stumbled completely out of his chair. Even my mother let out a gasp in surprise.

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“Holy shit!” my father exclaimed.

“Shet!” Eleanor echoed, laughing at my father falling.

“Honey! What did I say about cursing in front of Ellie?” My mother reprimanded while blocking my sister’s ears.

“Haha Sorry. Sorry! Ellie, don’t listen to what your father just said.” He then turned back to me.

“My son is still the same genius he used to be. Come on. Have a quick spar with your old man.” My father grinned menacingly while clasp my shoulders.

“Dear! He just got home! Let him rest.” Mother pulled me back.

“It’s fine, Mom.” I gently placed my hand on top of hers, giving her a reassuring smile.

“Men! Always trying to fight! Isn’t that right, Ellie?” My mother shook her head helplessly.

“Papa and Brother are men!” echoed Ellie, trying to mimic our mother’s expression.

Both father and I laughed this time. It was really good to be back.

We all got up to move to the backyard when I hear the door open.

“Rey! I just heard your son was alive. What the hell is going on?” I see a thin, proper man with glasses and parted hair in a suit, sweating, with what I assumed to be his wife and daughter running behind him.

“Vincent, everyone! I would like you to meet my son, Arthur! He’s back, Vince! Haha!”

My father wrapped his arm around the man’s shoulder.

“Arthur, this is Vincent, my old friend and the person I now work for. This is his house, so introduce yourself before we start wrecking it,” he grinned broadly.

Bowing at a ninety-degree angle, I introduced myself. “It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Arthur Leywin. I’m not sure what my family has told you about me, but I was in contact with them a while back. I was also the one that told them to not tell anyone

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until I got back, so I apologize for the confusion. Thank you for taking care of my family all this time.” This man was the one that housed my family in their toughest time. As far as I was concerned, I owed him and his family dearly.

“Y-Yeah, It’s really no problem. I’m glad that you’re alive and safe.” He adjusted his glasses as if making sure he was really speaking to an eight-year-old. “Meet my wife, Tabitha, and my daughter, Lilia,” he continued, pushing them forward so they were in front of him.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you ma’am, Lilia.” I bowed again, Sylvie introducing herself too with a “Kyu!”

Tabitha gave a kind smile in response. “Great to have you in our home, Arthur. Say hi, Lilia! Arthur is your age, so don’t be shy.”

The girl named Lilia spoke up, pointing hesitantly at the creature on my head. “W-What’s that?! It’s so cute.”

“This is an infant mana beast that I’m bonded with. Her name is Sylvie. Sylvie, get down and say hello.”

Sylvie leaped off my head and mewed at Lilia.

“Oh my gosh!” Lilia squealed.

“Rey, what did you mean by wrecking my house?” Vincent asked after peeling his eyes off of Sylvie.

“We were just on our way to the backyard. Arthur and I are going to have a little spar.

Want to come?” he chuckled.

Vincent sputtered incredulously, ”W-what? Are you serious? Your son just got home and you want to fight him? Besides, your son can’t be older than eight. What are you going to spar with him for?”

“Don’t let my son’s age fool you! He’s already a light red stage augmenter!” my father harrumphed proudly, puffing his chest.

Vincent just shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous, Rey. Your eight-year-old son has already awakened, and he’s gotten past three stages? Even the snobby genius brats

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that get admitted into Xyrus Academy are barely at the dark red stage, and that’s when they’re eleven or twelve!”

My father just laughed louder in response before he added, while leading us to the backyard, “You’ll see. Besides, I have a little surprise as well.”

We put proper distance between each other on the large grass lot outside.

“Ready when you are,” I smiled, setting Sylvie off to the side next to the audience, which consisted of the rest of my family and the Helstea family.

“Be careful, Art! You may be at the light red stage, but your old man is still at a higher stage than you!” He pounded his two fists together, giving me a confident smirk.

I spotted Vince, who was still shaking his head in disbelief.

“Come!” my father taunted, getting in an offensive stance.

Let’s see how much my training with Grandpa Virion had paid off.

My body, already strengthened through assimilation, responded to mana much more acutely than it had before. Before my father had the time to prepare, my fist was already in range of his body.

Even my hearing was more sensitive now as I could hear Vincent mutter faintly, “What in the...” along with several gasps by the others.

My father responded immediately as I could sense mana spreading throughout his body.

Feigning a punch, I twisted my torso and went for a high kick, but was promptly blocked by my father’s left arm.

It was obvious he didn’t expect my kick to be so powerful because his arm flung back from the blow, opening his guard. However, before I was able to make use of that opening, he used the momentum to chop his right hand at my body.

It was obvious that I was now in a disadvantageous position, but a full previous lifetime of fighting had already prepared me with how to counter him.

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I took his chop with my left forearm and right palm to soften the blow, and also to create enough space for me to slip inside.

My body wasn't big enough for me to shoulder-toss him so instead, I grabbed his right arm and kicked the back side of his right knee.

Losing balance, he fell forward as I used my mana-imbued body to throw him.

Unfortunately, he regained balance too quickly and I had no choice but to put some distance between us before he got a hold of me.

"Well I'd have to say you're better than all of the mages I've trained! Your old man's going to get serious now, though! Be careful." He put on a more serious face. It was apparent to both of us that we had both been holding back.

The mysterious fact about mana formed inside the core during the earlier stages was that it differed depending on how augmenters and conjurers used it.

While expensive, many parents chose to have their newly-awakened child tested to see what element they were most adept at by using a special device. A conjurer's attribute became very noticeable depending on what type of elements they had an easier time casting.

For augmenters, however, it was a lot less obvious because most of their attacks were focused on using mana to enhance their bodies. However, even augmenters had differentiations in how adept they were in certain types of elements. One quick example was culmination of gathering mana into a single point and releasing it in an explosive attack. While no visible flames were involved, an augments who had an easier time utilizing mana in that manner would typically be considered a fire-attribute mage.

That was only applied in the beginning.

While it differed per person, after a certain threshold in one's mana core and comprehension of the element, he or she could be utilizing mana in a way to actually pertain to the user's attribute. For conjurers, this meant that they could start slowly progressing away from the training wheels of chanting and start shortening their verses or even completely forgoing it in the element that they were adept at.

For augmenters, it would become much more noticeable because they could begin manifesting their elemental attribute instead of manipulating mana in a manner

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corresponding to their elemental attribute.

For example, before breaking through, a fire attribute augments's attack would simply carry a more powerful explosive burst, while wind attribute augmenters would find it easier to manipulate mana into faster and sharper attacks.

However, upon sufficient comprehension, the augmenters' element attribute would actually influence their attacks physically. Earth-attribute augmenters could learn to produce a gauntlet of earth and can even learn to create small seismic shocks by stomping their foot, while wind-attribute augmenters could be taught to release small blades of wind and create a vacuum effect in their punches, and so on. All of these were essentially techniques that mages could utilize upon sufficient comprehension of their respective element.

Of course, conjurers still had the major advantage of being able to influence a lot more of their surroundings. Their range was also a lot farther, but their weakness was still the vulnerability that they had in the process of chanting, and their bodies weren't naturally protected by mana.

Because of these differences, both types of mages that could break the threshold were much stronger than mages that couldn't, and ultimately determined the talent and future accomplishments they could achieve.

While conjurers could innately control elements because of how proficient they were at absorbing nature's mana with their mana veins, augmenters were different.

For every one attribute augments there was, there were ten that weren't. There were cases of attribute augmenters that never break the threshold and become fully-fledged elemental attribute augmenters. This was where proper schooling came into play; with enough guidance from early on, mages would more likely be able to be led to comprehension of their elemental attribute.

My father's two fists ignited, bursting into fiery gloves of scarlet. This control over his fire element was novice, apparent from the steam coming from his body. This meant that there was unnecessary mana being spread out throughout his body.

I had learned early on that my father was a fire attribute mage, but after reaching a bottleneck for years while being a busy father, he was able to reach the orange stage and, more impressively, was able to break through in his comprehension in fire. He

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could now be considered an official elemental augments, or elemental for short.

I shot him a proud grin, before readying myself as well.

"Impressive, Dad... but now it's my turn."

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In the world I had come from, elemental augmenters were merely practitioners of different sects.

The Earth, Fire, Water, and Wind Sects consisted of their own techniques that utilized their element.

What had allowed me to become King in my old world was knowing how to fight in all four different practices of the elements. Translate that here and I'd be a sort of quadra-elemental mage, if that even existed. Of course, I did have my preferences. My weakest elements were earth and wind while my strongest were fire and water. I hardly used wind, and even less of earth, except for slight support. No. I was feared in battle because of my mastery in the two complete opposite elements of Water and Fire.

While I was training with Gramps, I had tested out numerous theories that I had kept in my mind. One thing I had learned very quickly during that time was that I had absolutely no talent for conjuring. Grandpa brought over an elven conjurer one day when I had asked him to get someone to teach me the basics and I ended up nearly killing myself.

Augmenting and conjuring were very different in one sense, and very similar in another. An augments could potentially have the ability to do what conjurers were capable of and vice versa. However, this only came with advanced breakthroughs in the top mana core stages as well as a much higher form of comprehension in the respective element.

I had thought that maybe I could bypass that fundamental rule and become both a conjurer and augments. I just regretted that I had to learn the hard way that that wasn't possible. Another theory I had tested was my potential ability as a deviant.

Grandpa Virion and Tess had both been shocked speechless after they found out I could manipulate all four elements, but after four months of trying to see if I could control any of the higher elements, I received mixed results.

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"Try not to be too surprised!"

Crackling sounds popped in the air around me as my hair stood on its end by the electric current coursing through me. Currents of yellow lightning enveloped me as I prepared to attack.

"What the..." My father had almost stopped his attack after the shock had left him unfocused. Before giving him the chance to recover, I dashed towards him, leaving a trail of charred grass and earth behind me. I blinked behind him, concentrating lightning into my fist as I went in for a hook.

A frightening explosion occurred as my fist collided with his. While my father had managed to block my attack, the recoil pushed him into a nearby tree.

Getting back to his feet, my father imbued his arm in fire before looking at me. We both stayed silent, our gaze enough to tell each other our intents. As he lunged towards me with a speed fearsome for his size, I readied myself as well. As soon as my father got in range, he let out a flurry of precise jabs as my assimilated body, coupled with the nerve enhancing effect of the lightning coursing through me, was able to dodge each one with minimal movement. Lightning and fire intertwined as I parried and dodged his fists, each of his jabs growing faster and sharper; he truly was my father.

I was at a severe disadvantage because of my height and reach and my father wasn't one who'd let that opportunity go wasted. He kept his optimal distance instead of carelessly getting close as I did all I could to get in range. As I parried each of his fists, I fired small bursts of lightning, slowly whittling down the feelings in his arms. My father didn't notice until it was too late, though; his swings and jabs were becoming dull and sloppy. Seizing the opportunity, I ducked under his swing and prepared for an

uppercut, and just when my fist was about to make contact, my father's knee positioned just below my jaw.

It was a stalemate.

The tension from the spar immediately dissipated as my father clasped my shoulders.

“Ow!” he let out a surprised yelp.

I still had electric currents surrounding me, giving him a little shock. I smiled back as

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I dispersed my mana, allowing my father to pick me up. While I was able to finally break through into the world of deviants, I was still a beginner. I had a lot to work on for my lightning attribute magic since this was something completely new to me as well. As for ice attribute magic, it was even harder for me at the moment. Using either of them required an excessive amount of mana, most of which was wasted on inept utilization. I was also bound by a strict limit on the duration of use, with lightning magic for about three minutes, and for ice, even less.

While, right now, using lightning attribute magic was more of a liability on myself than an asset, in the future, this definitely wouldn't be the case.

The reason why only very few mages were able to transcend the basic element that they were adept in and into its higher form was because the higher form was completely different and incomparably more difficult. Of course, while me being able to learn both lightning and ice within four months probably didn't back up this point, need I remind you again that I was a complete beginner in these higher forms of elements? While my old world helped me gain knowledge and understanding to transcend into the higher forms of the elements, my old world experiences didn't prepare me for after I had become a deviant.

As for sound and gravity, I had yet to produce any favorable results. In order to even take the first step, a mage needed to understand the link between the basic elements into its higher form. After that, the mage's body needed to be able to naturally understand this link and harmonize the structure of the mana from the basic element to its higher form. For wind and earth, even if I had somehow become able to grasp the link between the basic to its higher form, my body wouldn't be able to change the structure of the mana particles.

My theory held true when I realized I wasn't compatible to wind and earth in this world as well.

The energy from my body was drained and as soon my father put me back down, I collapsed on my butt. It was then that I had the chance to finally notice the dead silence surrounding my father and me.

My father had always been the type to easily accept facts, and he knew I was already some sort of monstrous genius, so me being a deviant didn't really surprise him all too much. However, this hardly applied to everyone else here. The only one that seemed fascinated was my sister, but that was simply because she didn't really get what had

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happened. She was probably used to seeing Father fight, so nothing outside of that really registered as odd. Vincent and Tabitha's faces were both in sync: faces pale, jaws slack, eyes wide. My mother had her hands covering her mouth in shock, while even Lilia knew that what I did wasn't normal.

Compared to my father's excited yet unsurprised acceptance, this reaction was more so within my expectations.

"Haha... Surprise!" I threw up my arms, laughing weakly.

"Kuu~!" Sylvie scampered towards me, giving me a concerned gaze, as if asking, 'are you okay, Papa?'

Vincent was the first to speak up.

“D-Deviant!” he managed to spew out.

“My god...” Tabitha just sighed in astonishment.

“So, Art. When exactly did you learn that new trick?” my father asked, more in a curious tone than one of shocked bewilderment. He shook his head while ruffling my hair.

“Not too long ago, Dad. I can barely control it, though,” I replied sheepishly.

We all made our way back into the living room where we all situated ourselves around the dining table.

“Rey... your son. Do you realize the kind of future he has? He’s only eight, but he’s already stronger than a veteran B-rank Adventurer,” Vincent said, hardly able to contain his excitement.

My father scratched his head. “This is crazy. I thought that him awakening at the age of three was already terrifying, but to think he would become a deviant as well...”

“What? He awakened at the age of three?!” Tabitha cried out, bolting up from her seat.

My mother just nodded at this. “Arthur managed to blow up most of our house in the process.”

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Both my father and Vincent leaned back, sinking in their chairs as they let out a synced sigh...

“Papa? Are yoo okay?” Eleanor poked Father in the cheek.

Laughing, Father picked her up off of Mother's lap, "Haha, yeah. I'm okay, Princess."

Vincent got up from his chair now and looked seriously at us, arms stretched out on the table.

"Rey, how about enrolling your son in Xyrus Academy?"

"What? You can't be serious, right? He's only eight!" my father refuted, sitting up in his chair.

Tabitha chimed in. "Rey, Alice, I think your child is more than capable of exceeding at Xyrus."

"I thought that only noble geniuses were allowed to attend Xyrus Academy?" Mother responded, concern etched into her face.

Excitedly, Vincent voiced out, "I can handle that! I do a lot of business with the Director of Xyrus Academy, so she'll be lenient in the enrollment process."

"B-But the school fees are much too extravagant for us to handle," Mother argued, still doubtful of the idea of sending me.

"Alice, that should be the least of your worries. We will be glad to pay for the fees.

Arthur's talent is immeasurable. Who knows what he can accomplish? Even if we don't pay, I'm sure he'd find nobles that would beg to sponsor him." Tabitha held Alice's hands in her own for reassurance.

"Ahem! Do you mind if I have a say in this?" People always seemed to forget that the person's future they were trying to decide was right there with them.

"I have just arrived back home today. Can I spend a bit of time with my family before I decide whether to go to school or not?" I gave a meaningful gaze to Vincent.

“O-Of course. I apologize. Haha. I guess I was too excited there for a moment.” He just laughed weakly before sitting back down.

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“Thank you.” I gave the Helstea family a smile.

I turned my head to face my mother. “Mom, where do I sleep?”

“Oh yes! I almost forgot! You’ll have your room next to Eleanor’s, in the left wing. Come on, let’s all go up now, it’s getting late.”

Sylvie had already fallen asleep on my head and my baby sister was nodding in and out of her dream world while we were discussing my future.

Today had been a long day.

Mother and Father lead me to the room I’d be living in from today onwards. It was a lot larger than my room in Ashber, but still decorated in a homey fashion. While the furnishings did leave a lot of open space, it worked perfectly since I needed some space to train.

As I settled Sylvie down on the bed, Mother and Father sat down next to me.

“We’ll go shopping together tomorrow. We need to get you some clothes.” My mother ran her fingers through my hair.

My father squatted down in front of me, grabbing my arm. “Arthur, whether you’re a genius or not, you’re still my son, and I’ll be proud of you and love you, regardless of circumstances.” His face was unusually serious. It was comforting knowing that they would always treat me as their son instead of their “little genius.”

I quietly nodded in return. I thought of revealing the full extent of my abilities, but decided that it might be safer to do it in baby steps.

Before he stood back up, he pinched my cheek and gave me an evil smile. “Besides, I know you held back on me with your lightning magic today. Don’t think you fooled me!

We’ll have a rematch soon.”

My mother just chortled at this, “I swear, all you guys think about is fighting.”

She looked at me with a comforting smile in her eyes. “Your father is right, though. No matter what kind of genius you are, you’ll still be my baby boy.”

“Haha. Can’t I be your adolescent boy now? I’m eight-and-a-half now, Mom!” I grinned

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back at her.

“Nope! You can’t!” she just retorted before the both of them left my room.

“Get some rest now. Let’s go shopping with your sister tomorrow. It’ll be a great chance for you guys to bond,” my mother said before closing the door behind her.

I didn’t even have the energy to wash up. I just plopped into bed, bouncing the slumbering Sylvie, who whined at me before nodding off to sleep.

Today was a long day. It was a good, long day.

With a smile plastered on my face, I followed Sylvie into a comforting sleep.

I woke up the next morning to my baby dragon licking furiously at my face.

“Haha I’m up Sylv, I’m up!”

“Kyu~!” She was hopping up and down on top of me, a feeling of excitement radiating from her.

I thought of Tess. I had never thought I would miss being woken up by her spartan methods. I wonder how she’s doing?

Tess had become my closest friend growing up, and while she had turned a bit fierce, she was still the same kind-hearted Tess that worried about me and took care of me while I was in Elenoir.

I took a quick shower, dragging my smelly dragon with me. She cried in distress at the warm water drenching her, but I didn’t relent, and soon after, we were both sparkling clean.

“...Kyu...” Sylvie moaned and plopped down on my bed, exhausted from struggling.

“Don’t complain! Both of us were filthy and we didn’t wash yesterday, either.”

I heard a knock on my door, so I quickly put on the rest of my clothes.

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“Coming!” I said, my shirt still over my head.

Opening the door, I looked down to spot a shy Eleanor, looking down, with her foot rubbing something on the ground.

“Well hello there, Ellie.” I squatted down so I was at eye-level with her, giving her the gentlest smile I could muster.

“G-G’morning Bruhder. Mama told me to w-wake you up,” she muttered, her head still down.

“Haha, I see! Thank you very much, little sister,” I exclaimed while patting her head.

This seemed to get a good response out of her as she started blushing a little.

“Can you take me down to the kitchen?” I asked, holding out my hand.

“En!” She nodded excitedly and while she hesitated for a second, she grabbed my hand and pulled me along.

Sylvie followed behind us, trotting while taking a look around at her new surroundings.

I’m met with a pleasant smell of bacon as we entered the kitchen. Inside, I spotted Tabitha and my mother cooking something as they chatted. Lilia was sitting down at the table already, her legs swinging, obviously waiting for breakfast.

“Good morning, Mom, Ma’am, Lilia!” I announced.

“G’morning!” “Kyu!” Both Ellie and Sylvie echo.

“Ah! Ellie managed to wake you up! I remember having the hardest time waking you up, even when you were a baby, Art. I swear, you slept like a log.” My mother chuckled as she placed some eggs into a large plate.

“Did you sleep well?” smiled Tabitha as she tossed the bowl of salad she had in her hands.

“I slept great, Mrs. Helstea.”

“Hi, Ellie! G-Good morning, Arthur...” Lilia softly said as her voice trailed off after meeting my gaze.

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I smiled and return the greeting.

Breakfast was great. Mother mentioned that usually, the maids were the ones to cook, but she wanted to cook today for me. It had been too long since I had mother's cooking, and I now realized how dearly I had missed it. I made sure to give some of the meat to Sylvie, who didn't hesitate to gobble whatever entered her mouth, including my finger.

Eventually, Ellie and Lilia both wanted to try feeding her, so I told them to go ahead.

Needless to say, Sylvie warmed up to both of them a bit more after being fed by them.

"The carriage is waiting out front, so just leave the dishes in the sink and let's head out!" announced Tabitha.

Xyrus was an amazing city. I couldn't help but stare at the different sights that came into view as we travelled down the main road. I could see magic shops, armories, spell books, and even beast core shops! There was everything a mage could ask for. Adults and children were all dressed extravagantly while luxurious carriages passed alongside ours. Some buildings were several stories high, making this city seem a lot bigger and denser than Ashber. I could also see children a couple years older than me, all wearing similar uniforms—some black, some grey and red. I could only assume by their pretentious demeanor that they were students of Xyrus Academy. While uniforms in my old world were meant to protect financial backgrounds to lessen discrimination, here, it seemed that the uniforms themselves worked as a sort of gold medallion that they could show off to the rest of the world.

We eventually reached the fashion district of Xyrus. It was here I learned that shopping for clothes with females took a harder toll on my body than training with Grandpa Virion, and even the thought of his training regimen had left me in cold sweat.

I was used as a mannequin for each of the girls' own preferences in style. My mother wanted to dress me in simple clothes, while Tabitha wanted to

transform me into some sort of prince. Even Lilia and Ellie made me try on some clothes.

“You need to look good since you’re my bruhder!” she announced loudly, her hands on her hips.

Sylvie could feel the exhaustion radiating from me, so she comfortingly perched on my head, as if to gloat.

I ended up with ten different sets of clothes, half from Mother and the other half from

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Tabitha. Both Mother and I tried to stop Tabitha from buying me anything, but she scolded us, playfully saying with a wink, “Just think of it as an investment. Besides, I’ve always wanted a son.”.

We looked around more after towing our bags of clothes into the carriage. I was excited to see the armory. I had really wanted a decent sword to start practicing swordsmanship again; it was apparent that my skills diminished after such a long break from proper training. The girls didn’t want that, though, and I was forced to go into different jewelry and gem stores instead. I guess I would have to visit the armory with Father next time.

Eventually, we arrived back home, my physical and mental strength depleted by the time Father came back home soon after.

“How was your day, Son?” He chuckled, taking a seat next to me on the dining table.

“I never thought shopping could be so utterly tiring,” I groaned.

As if hearing my complaints, Vincent and Tabitha sat down across from us.

“HAHA! I heard you got beat up by a bunch of women today, Arthur!” Vincent exclaimed.

I just feebly nodded while Tabitha smirked and exchanged looks with Mother, “The little prodigy of yours isn’t as big of a deal as I thought he was.” Lilia and Ellie giggled at this.

“I will admit that a woman’s endurance cannot be matched when they’re out shopping,” I just wryly refuted.

My father and Vincent laughed harder at this and nodded their heads in agreement.

The sound of a doorbell followed by a couple of knocks got everyone’s attention.

“Ah! Looks like she’s here!” Vincent perked up.

The look on everyone else’s face told me that Vincent was the only one who knew what was going on.

Vincent came back, leading an elderly woman into the dining room.

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“Rey, Alice, Arthur, I know you guys said that you want to put off school for later, but I just couldn’t hold it in. Everyone. Meet Cynthia Goodsky! She’s the Director of Xyrus Academy.”

Noticing the slight twinge of annoyance on my face, Vincent immediately said, “Don’t worry, I didn’t bring her here to make you go to school right away. I just wanted her to meet you.”

The Director gave me a smile that I couldn’t quite understand the meaning of and held out her hand. “Nice to finally meet you, Arthur.”

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Xyrus Academy, an institution hailed as the most exalted sanctuary for any of the would-be-mages privileged enough to have both the background and talent to enter.

There were several other academies scattered throughout the Kingdom of Sapin, but needless to say, the level between those second-rate schools and Xyrus was insurmountable.

That was the kind of titan Xyrus Academy was. Those who qualified to graduate from this academy were guaranteed a prosperous future and life. It was rumored that the top graduates could even become honored guards, instructors or military leaders for the Royal Family, and for the King of the entire race of humans on this continent. Of course, some chose to go the humbler route and focused on research by joining one of the mage guilds. However, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that students of Xyrus Academy were hailed as the true elites, even among nobles.

Now, here I was, standing in front of the said academy's Director. Normally, any eight-year-old—hell, any person—would be ecstatic to be in the presence of someone so affluent, but I couldn't help but let out an expression of annoyance at the unexpected guest.

She was a very tall lady, standing around 1.7 meters, well above the average for females here. She held herself in a very upright, poised manner. She wore a simple, yet elegant robe of navy blue laced with gold threading. She sported a conjurer's hat, an accessory that looked like an oversized traffic cone, that amplified the absorption rate of the surrounding mana but oftentimes came with other functions. Strapped to the side of her robe was a wand that was a crystalline white color with a fluorescent gem attached. Even my ignorant eyes could tell that this wand was extremely valuable.

Surprisingly, her face had very soft features that reminded me more of a friendly grandmother next door than an all-important figure of power, but the aura she had around her made her seem fairy-like, her wrinkles unable mask the attractive face that she had. The crow's feet etched on the outer

ends of her brown eyes actually amplified the attractiveness of her smile when she introduced herself.

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"Nice to finally meet you, Arthur," She said holding her hand out.

What was I supposed to do in this situation? Was I supposed to shake it or is someone of power like her expecting me to kiss her hand or something?

I just went with the safe route and shook her hand.

"Err... Nice to meet you too, Director."

The Director seemed a little taken aback by my introduction.

"Arthur! You're being rude! I'm so sorry for my son, Director Goodsky. He just returned home and is ignorant about formal customs." My mother pushed my head down with her hand while bowing herself, getting on one knee.

Apparently, when meeting someone of high standing, it was customary to get on one knee and shake the hand while bowing.

How stupid.

"Kukuku, no, it is quite all right. No offense taken at all. And please, Arthur, call me Cynthia." She let out a polite laugh with her free hand covering her mouth.

"I'm sorry to intrude on you at such a late time but unfortunately, the only free time I could make was after my meeting tonight. I hope you don't mind," she explained, looking at my parents.

"Nonono, we're thankful that you'd be willing to take the time out just to visit our son."

My father was the one to speak this time.

By the amount of formality, I had started wondering if this granny could compare to Grandpa Virion.

Director Cynthia nodded at this. “True, it isn’t very often that I take a house trip to visit a potential student. Otherwise, even with a hundred bodies, I wouldn’t be able to fit the time. However, Vincent is a good friend and has contributed greatly to Xyrus Academy. So when he had excitedly come up to me about a prodigy that is living in his home, I couldn’t help but get excited as well. I must say that my curiosity got the best of me. Do you mind leading me to an open space so I can see a demonstration?” she continued on, her gaze fixed at me in an assessing manner.

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“Can I at least eat din... Ouch!” My mother slapped me in the butt before I could finish my sentence.

“Of course! Please follow us, Director Cynthia.” My mother ushered me, leading Director Cynthia while the rest followed.

My dinner...

Sylvie, who had been hiding underneath the dinner table from the unfamiliar human, trotted behind me, causing Director Cynthia to raise an eyebrow.

“Oh my... What a lovely mana beast. I assume it is your contracted beast, Arthur?” she asked me inquisitively while kneeling down to get a closer view of Sylvie.

“Yeah, she hatched a few months ago. Her name is Sylvie,” I simply responded, my mother’s hand still grabbing onto the back of my shirt to keep me from escaping.

“I have to say, while it is common for nobles to buy beasts to contract, I have never seen a mana beast like yours.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I explained, “I’m not exactly sure what she is either. Her mother seemed to be some sort of scaled wolf-like creature. She was already gravely wounded when I stumbled into her nest. She was protecting her egg.”

She reached to pet Sylvie but she scampered away and climbed on top of my head.

“Sorry, she’s a bit shy around strangers.”

“I see. Well enough about her. Let us see if what Vincent said wasn’t just exaggeration.

He didn’t tell me much except that you’re an augments, saying the rest would be a surprise.” She let out a wry smile, making Vincent blush.

We arrived at the backyard and everyone took seats, giving us enough space. Sylvie struggled to escape the grasp of my little sister, whom I entrusted her with.

“You’re not going to use your wand?” I started stretching.

“It isn’t very fair of me to be using a weapon when you yourself are empty-handed as well, right?” She gave me a wink.

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She made a solid point.

I stomped my right foot into the ground and a piece of the ground the size of my body thrust up. My hands were lazily stuffed in my pockets, so I kicked the rock in Director Cynthia’s direction.

A wind wall appeared instantly in front of her, knocking up the rock I had just kicked high into the air.

Ooh, Insta-casting.

I guess she wasn't just a director that sat in front of her desk, signing papers.

Her brows raised in surprise by the sudden attack I threw at her, but she quickly composed herself. I could tell she hadn't been expecting an elemental attack from me, especially since she knew I was an augments.

I willed a gust of wind underneath my feet and propel myself to her.

Her expression grew even more surprised as I easily jumped up three meters into the air with the help of my wind attribute skill as a swirling whirlwind enveloped my right fist. Using the boulder that had just been knocked up by the Director as a foothold, I kicked off it to gain enough momentum to hopefully break through her barrier.

The collision of her and our two spells created an erratic current of wind, forcing the audience to cover themselves.

The collision blew me back, but Director Cynthia remained steady on her feet. Before I was able to recompose myself, the director had already finished her next move as gusts of wind swirled and shaped themselves into four twisters the size of small trees.

Without even a visible command from her, the twisters shot themselves towards me.

Gathering wind attribute mana around me, I willed a small tornado to form around me, spinning the opposite direction of Director Goodsky's spell. Using the centrifugal force generated by my cyclone, I began spinning along with it, using my hands to create blades of wind.

The clash between the four twisters and my cyclone created a small crater, but otherwise, didn't do me any harm besides making me very dizzy.

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"Impressive. It seems like I will have to take you just a bit more seriously."

Instantly, I'm knocked back, my ears ringing and my vision unsteady.

She was a deviant... a sound mage, at that.

I steadied myself, taking a glance at my opponent who was staring back at me with a mildly impressed expression on her face.

My head began spinning, trying to think of different possible moves I could take to win, but she had me in a checkmate. Suppressing my pride and stubbornness, I took a seat on the ground, admitting defeat.

"That should be enough for a demonstration, right, Director?" I rubbed my temples.

"Yes... That is quite sufficient," she muttered. There was a long pause as she began studying me with a newly-found interest.

She regained her senses and made her way towards me when I heard my father's voice.

"A-Arthur... You know how to use earth and wind attribute spells as well?"

"What do you mean, 'as well'?" Director Cynthia interrupted, her composed look turning into a look of confusion.

My mother continued on for my baffled father.

"H-he, my son—we thought he was a fire elemental. He's a deviant as well that can use lightning magic!"

I could hear Director Cynthia's breath turn short, and for the first time, gave an expression of someone truly in shock.

“S-surely you jest... you mean to say that he is capable of controlling three elements?”

“Four, actually. I can control all four,” I cut in. Everyone was going to find out anyway.

This wasn’t something that I could, nor wanted, to hide.

“Earth and wind are my weakest elements. I’m a lot more adept in controlling fire and

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water. I also happen to be deviants in both those elements, although I have just begun training in them.” I got up to my feet, shaking off my dizziness from the previous attack.

I wasn’t expecting a sound user so I didn’t bother enhancing my ears. The director was quite cruel, though. If my body hadn’t gone through assimilation, my hearing would have been quite damaged.

No one responded back to what I had just said, the only sound nearby being the cliché chirps of crickets. It was understandable that they’d be this surprised, but I was getting tired of the shocked expressions.

The noble figure that controlled the most prominent school in the continent stumbled forward, barely making it to a chair. Then, unexpectedly, she began laughing. She started off with a low chuckle, but that soon escalated into a wild laugh of what seemed to me like sheer joy.

Finally, turning back to me, she said, “Arthur, If I may repeat, you are a quadra elemental capable of controlling two higher elements, correct?”

I’m also a Dragon Tamer, but that’s about it. I wonder how they would react if I told them that.

“Correct,” I immediately answered, not bothering to elaborate.

“Please demonstrate.” Director Cynthia’s eyes grew menacing and the once-friendly grandmother now had the look of a veteran killer as she raised her hand, the mana around her fluctuating.

Suddenly, a vacuum of wind began sucking me towards her as a visible sphere of wind formed in her other palm.

This woman...

I willed water into my right palm and a condensed ball of fire in my left. She wanted to see so badly; I’d just have to show her.

Combining the two opposing skills together, I created a massive cloud of steam, completely enshrouding the both of us from everyone else’s sight.

The cloud of steam didn’t last long against the wind mage, but it did give me enough time for me to create a spear of ice. I quickly repositioned myself after throwing the

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spear of ice just as the steam dissipated. As expected, the director easily blocked my ice spear just before I was in range to land a fist encased in lightning. However, just like before, I was blown away by a powerful sound wave. Fortunately, I had reinforced mana over my ears, but there was no way for me to get near her.

“Whew! I must say that I’m thoroughly convinced! You pass, Arthur Leywin.” She clapped her hands, breaking the silence.

Getting back up, I dusted myself off. This demonstration had left me with a mixture of feelings. I was frustrated on one hand that there were figures I couldn’t even touch, let alone defeat. However, for the first time, I began seriously considering the potential value of learning at Xyrus. If I could have a professor that was on a level near Director Goodsky, my magic would make leaps and bounds.

“Sorry for hiding this from you guys,” I said, turning to my parents. I was a bit worried that my parents might be angry for keeping this from them, but fortunately, my father took it pretty well.

“My son is the first ever quadra elemental!” He scooped me up by my armpits and swung me around like he did when I was an infant.

Suddenly, the traumatic memories began popping back up.

“Please, Art, no more secrets.” My mother just wryly smiled, concern still etched on her face.

I couldn’t promise her that, but I’d like to believe it was for her protection, not for my convenience.

“Forget a quadra elemental; in this continent, there aren’t even any tri elementals but you, Art...” Tabitha chimed in, her voice trailing into a sigh.

“Is Bruhder strong?” my sister chimed in, still clutching onto Sylvie.

Patting her head, the Director nodded. “Your brother has the ability to become very strong, little one.”

“Heehee!” She had a proud look on her face, as if she was the one getting complimented.

Vincent’s face was still a picture of disbelief as he still was in the middle of processing

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everything. As Lilia made sure her father was alright, she took a quick glance towards my direction with a mixture of astonishment and a little fear on her face.

I didn’t blame her.

My father set me down and I turned to Director Cynthia, giving her a stern gaze—a gaze that I knew didn't fit an eight-year-old.

“Director Goodsky. There's actually a reason I didn't hide my capabilities today.”

Picking up on the seriousness in my voice, she nodded in understanding. “I had a hunch that you weren't just brazenly showing off your skills, Arthur. You seemed too sharp for that.”

Agreeing with her, I responded, “There are only a few benefits I can gain from attending your school. One is learning how to utilize my Lightning and Ice elements.

However, that is something I can learn on my own with due time. No. The main reason I would attend your academy, if I chose to at all, is for protection. Right now, I'm not strong enough to protect everyone. However, you hold a position of power and influence that can provide safety for my family and I, at least until I can gain the strength to protect them myself.”

“Arthur! You're being rude to Director Goodsky! How can you...”

“No, it's fine, Alice.” Immediately after she said this, the director mumbled a soft chant before speaking again.

“Arthur, I believe you hold the ability to make changes in this world. For that, if you're willing to attend Xyrus Academy and become a rightful citizen that will do anything to protect his land, then I will abide by any criteria you set.” Director Goodsky's voice was clear and determined.

“Very well, I will learn what I feel is valuable from the classes your school offers and train my own powers. As long as you give me the tools and freedom to do so, as well as keep my loved ones safe, then I will consider you as an important benefactor,” I promised.

Director Goodsky's lips curves up into a smile as we shook hands. At this, I was suddenly able to hear the voices of everyone else again. Looking at the director, she gave me wink.

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By the confused looks of everyone around us, I could only assume that what Director Goodsky had done was make everyone else unable to hear our voices.

Clarifying for everyone who couldn't hear, I said aloud, "I will abide by our agreement when I enroll in your academy."

"Oh? Were you not planning on enrolling into my Academy anytime soon?" The Director as well as every other adult had looks of puzzlement on their faces.

"I don't plan on entering Xyrus Academy until I would be of a normal age to actually attend. No. I've decided to enter your academy on my twelfth birthday, a very average age for one to enter your Academy. I assume that will not be a problem?" I tilted my head.

"Goodness! That's in a little over three years! Arthur, do you have any plans on what to do until then?" I figured Director Goodsky wouldn't be so accepting on prolonging my education for over three years.

I turned to face my parents again, since it was up to them to allow me or not.

I looked up at the night sky, stars shining. Unlike my old world, the lack of bright lights truly made the star-glittered night beautiful. Turning my gaze back to where my family was, I answered.

"I'd like to become an adventurer."

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“No! Absolutely no way! Arthur! Do you know how dangerous it is to become an Adventurer? You’ve just gotten back after we all thought you were dead and now you’re saying you want to go get yourself killed out there? No way! Absolutely not.”

My mother was on the verge of tears while she said this. She had never been good at controlling her emotions. Eleanor was beside her, clutching onto her leg.

“Mama, don’t be angry. Bruhder not bad a person! Uuu... Mama, don’t cry.”

Director Goodsky had left the manor after my announcement. I could tell she still wanted to ask me a lot of questions but we excused ourselves to have a family talk. We were currently inside my parents’ room with my mother, standing up in front of me, forbidding me to even think about doing anything remotely dangerous.

Father was a bit more rational. I could tell he didn’t like the idea as well, but he couldn’t really see any reason for me not to be an adventurer besides my age.

I wasn’t going to debate with my mother. She was saying all of this because she was worried, and I could never blame her for that. It was something I had expected, and I wanted to slowly ease her into the idea, but the meeting with Director Goodsky threw the timing off of everything.

After being silent the whole time, my father finally spoke up. “Honey, let’s hear Arthur out at least. I’m not saying I agree to him becoming an adventurer, but don’t you think we should at least listen to what he has to say?”

“How can you still say that after what happened that day?!” my mother yelled, breaking down into a fit of sobs.

I looked to my father for answers, curious about what she was talking about, but he simply shook his head and comforted my mother.

It seemed like a good hour before she had calmed down enough for us to speak again.

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I grabbed my mother's hands. "Mom. I wasn't planning on leaving tomorrow. I was looking forward to spending a few months at home with you guys."

She was still silent, but her face softened a little at that, and I just gave her a warm smile. Sylvie followed suit and began licking her hand.

"After being in the Elf Kingdom for three years, I missed a lot about what I should know about this world of ours. I just thought that becoming an adventurer would be the best way to gain some practical experience," I urged, not letting go of Mother's hands.

"I understand where you're coming from, Arthur. Although I was a bit older, I was also itching to get some real life experience in fighting as soon as I awakened as a mage,"

Father reminisced. "But your mother is also right in that it is dangerous and unpredictable."

My mother nodded her head vigorously at this.

I stayed silent for a little bit as I pondered.

"Dad. Mom. What if I were to have some sort of guard or supervisor with me? Would that make you feel a bit more at ease with this whole idea?"

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“Hmm... You know, that’s not a bad idea.” I could almost see the gears in my father’s head wind as he began thinking of potential candidates.

“B-But... I still won’t be able to see you for three years!” my mother began to protest again.

Shaking my head, I said to her, “Mom, I’m not going to go on long trips or go on dangerous missions to faraway places. I’ll try to come back every few months—maybe even more frequently than that, depending on what I do.”

“Bruhder, are you leaving?” My sister wore an expression as if she had just been told that Santa didn’t exist.

I started to panic. “Nono, Ellie, I’m staying here. You’ll be seeing your brother a lot from now on, okay?”

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Apparently, both my mother and father had told Eleanor a lot of stories about me and how strong and smart I was. One of Ellie’s favorite bedtime stories was how I saved Mother from a bunch of bad guys on top of a cliff and that I got hurt so it’d take me some time to come back home. Eventually, I had become some sort of hero to my sister.

I look back at my mother. Her face was considerably more at ease after talking about this. I guess she had just assumed the worst-case scenario and thought I wanted to slay the world’s strongest evil at the age of eight or something.

“Why did you want to be an adventurer before even going to school, anyways? Wasn’t it usually the opposite?” my mother softly muttered.

“Dad’s reason was a part of it; I want to test my skills out in real life situations. Also, Mom, I want to at least try to fit in with everyone when I go to school. It would be a lot harder to fit in if I began school at the age of

eight. I don't think I'll be able to make many friends with such a big age difference."

It was a very pitiful excuse, but, for once, my mother gave me a look of understanding.

I guess it was a mother's worst nightmare for her child to become a loner.

It wasn't a complete lie because I said it thinking of Sylvia's dying wish. She had wanted me to enjoy life and have a life not just of training. This was a promise that I planned on keeping no matter what.

"Besides, I'm going to be here for a couple of months, anyway. Who knows, maybe you'll get sick of me by then and throw me out before I even get the chance to leave," I winked at my mother.

That earned me a thump on the head, but she chuckled as well. "You! You're just like your father at times like these. Thank God you at least have my intelligence." She gave me a big hug, leaving me with a warm feeling that I still wasn't used to.

"Hey! What about my intelligence?! He was gifted with my adept abilities in fire, too!"

my father protested.

"Hmph! My son got his deviant powers from me." Mother just turned me away from my father and stuck her tongue out at him.

"Ellie, too! Bleh!" My sister copied my mother and stuck her tongue out at my devastated father.

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"Sniff! No one is on my side," he playfully cried, trying to hug his daughter, leaving us all in a fit of laughter.

The next day was a Sunday, leaving my father with the day off. Both the Leywin and Helstea family were dining together for breakfast. “So, did you guys settle on what to do about Arthur?” Vincent asked, half chewing on his omelet.

Tabitha shook her head; “I swear. Sometimes, I have such a hard time believing you’re a noble with your horrible dining habits, dear.”

“Kukuku, don’t worry. At least your husband’s better than mine. Remember that one dinner party where Rey spit out his food from laughing so hard? I had to use Ellie as an excuse to leave the table because I was so embarrassed,” my mother just sighed.

“Cough! Anyways! Yes, after talking about it yesterday night, we agreed to let him become an adventurer under some conditions, Vince.” My father just lightly blushed as he tried to switch back the topic.

“Oh? What conditions?” responded the curious Tabitha as she cut the omelet into smaller pieces for Lilia.

“He’s not going to become an adventurer until after his birthday, which is in three months. We also decided on having a guard with him on his missions. Besides that, I feel like he’ll be smart enough to manage the rest on his own. Of course, the last condition is that he’ll be visiting as often as possible,” my father explained, working on the rest of his roast beef.

“Do you have anyone in mind for who his guard is going to be? Heck, is there even a guard that is capable of guarding him? I feel like Arthur would be the one protecting the guard!” He just chuckled at the ridiculousness of an eight-year-old protecting a grown, veteran adventurer.

My mother answered him, looking at my father, “We haven’t really thought of a person that fits the criteria. Rey and I thought we could use one of the Helstea Auction guards, but we couldn’t really come up with anyone.”

“Can I have more omelet, please?” my sister chimed in with her fork raised in the air.

“I got it!” My father stood up from his sudden revelation, making me almost choke on the piece of meat that was in my mouth.

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“The Twin Horns will be coming back from an expedition in a dungeon soon. I received a letter from the Adventurer Guild Hall that says they should be back within two months! It’s perfect! Why did it take so long for me to think of this? We can just have one of the Twin Horns look after you. Arthur! You still remember them, right?” My father’s eyes shined in excitement.

“Hey! That’s not a bad idea!” my mother said from the kitchen, her voice implying the rarity in my father having a good idea.

Handing a piece of meat to Sylvie, who was perched on my lap with her front two paws on the table, I responded, too. “Of course I remember them. That sounds like a great idea, Dad. Do they know I’m back?”

“No. Unfortunately, I haven’t had the chance to send a letter to them yet. I was planning on doing that today.” My father sat back down, scratching his head.

Vincent chimed in on the conversation after finishing off his breakfast.

“Arthur, you told Director Cynthia yesterday that you weren’t going to show your powers to anyone until you enroll at Xyrus Academy, right? How were you planning on doing that while you’re an Adventurer?”

“Ah, yes. I’ve been meaning to get to that,” I said while picking up a strawberry with my fork. “I plan on keeping my identity hidden as an adventurer. I’ve read that there were many members of the Adventurer’s Guild that went by aliases, not revealing their identities to the public.” Unfortunately, since there was no way of masking the appearance of Sylvie, I would just have to do a good job of hiding her. Thankfully, she was small enough to fit inside a cloak if the pocket was big enough.

“Mm... I see.” Both Vincent and Tabitha nodded at this.

With that, breakfast ended and we all separated.

Father went to the Guild Hall to send a letter to his old party members while my mother and Tabitha went shopping, taking Ellie and Lilia along with them. They asked me to come as well, but I politely declined the offer to endure the suffering they call a pastime event.

I washed up and headed towards the right wing of the manor, where Vincent’s office was.

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Knock *Knock*

“Yes?”

“It’s Arthur,” I answered.

The door opened to reveal Vincent with a curious look on his face. “Ah, come in! What brings you here, Arthur? You’ve never really come into my office before.”

“Ah, yes. There is a certain matter I wish to talk to you about today, which is why I visited,” I said while looking around at the piles of documents on the floor and on his desk.

VINCENT HELSTEA’S POV:

Was this child really only eight years old?

Shivers ran down my spine at the tone of his voice. Why was I so nervous at the mention of a ‘certain matter’ he wanted to talk to me about?

“What sort of matter is it?” I just asked, my face turning a bit more serious.

“I would like your help in obtaining a few items that might be hard to find elsewhere.”

Continuing, he sat down and said with his eyes looking straight at me, “I need a sturdy hooded cloak or robe and a mask that can cover my entire face. It’s imperative that the mask has the function of changing my voice.”

It wasn’t hard to figure out why he wanted these items. As the owner of the Helstea Auction House that attracted even the highest of nobles and even the Royal Family, it shouldn’t be too hard to get these items. The mask might be a little tricky because a sound elemental artificer would need to be the one to make this, but it could be done.

Yet... why was there such a heavy feeling in this room?

I couldn’t quite place my finger on it...

That’s it!

Why was this eight-year-old child giving off the same pressure as the time I was next to the King of Sapin himself?

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No. The atmosphere now was even heavier than when I was with the king.

He was clearly asking me for a favor. But it felt as though he was gauging me, almost as if he was trying to evaluate where to put me on his list of ‘people to keep alive.’

I had never felt this from him, but that was probably because I had only ever seen him with his family.

I quickly replied, wanting to get it over with. “Sure, it shouldn’t be a problem getting those things. The mask might take a bit of time, but I’m sure we’ll have it before you become an adventurer.”

His slight nod actually filled me with relief. I had nobles that waited in line to introduce themselves to me, but this kid...

“Is there anything you would need my help for in exchange? I would feel bad just asking for this without any compensation,” eh responded.

I felt a little sweat forming above my brows. “I-It’s fine, really. I owe your father a lot, actually. He may be working for me, but the way he trains my guards have really lessened the number of problems that happen during the auctions.”

This was the truth, actually. Rey had become an irreplaceable part of the Helstea Auction Houses. His leadership and charisma amongst the guards he trained was first class. I owed him when he saved my life and I owed him and his family now. Even with the generous salary that was well above average and letting his family stay in our house, I still felt that it was actually a bargain on my part. Both Tabitha and Lilia have been happier now than ever after Rey moved in with Alice and had Ellie. I had always been filled with guilt for not being able to spend as much time with my family as they wanted, but things were a lot better now.

“Hmm, speaking of training, that actually gives me an idea,” he muttered while looking down.

I noticed quite a while ago that, when Arthur started thinking, he had this look... this look where his gaze focused afar and his brows furrowed; the subtle crease near his lips and the slight twitch of his nose made him appear to be thinking of something above what normal human intelligence would be capable of. It was the look of a true intellectual. Sigh. It’s hard to believe that he was the same age as my little Lilia.

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“Allow me to start training your daughter to become a mage.” He put down this land mine as if he was just talking about the weather.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

“I had been meaning to start teaching my baby sister mana manipulation soon. It wouldn't be too much trouble to include Lilia in these lessons. I noticed that both you and Lady Tabitha are not mages, so it might be impossible for her to awaken by herself, but if we start now, I think she'd be able to awaken around the average age,” I said.

My statement was met with silence. I looked up to see Vincent drop the stack of papers he had been fumbling with nervously. His face was frozen in place as I could hear his heart beating faster.

“C-Can I truly believe what you just said? Can you really allow my daughter to become a m-mage?” he asked after a seemingly long moment of silence.

“Sure. It'll be a long process, but it's definitely possible. Er... I will have to ask you to keep the lessons on a low profile, though. I would hate to be bombarded with doting parents asking to make their children into mages,” I just chuckled, trying to lighten up the tension.

He nodded furiously after failing to form a coherent sentence...

“Sincerely... there would be no greater happiness than seeing my daughter become a mage,” he managed to stammer out, tears on the verge of falling down.

“Great! Then I'll leave the items we discussed to you! Now, allow me to excuse myself out. Sorry for intruding in on your work.”

I walked myself out of the room, picking up the sleeping Sylvie from my lap.

I'm glad that worked out well.

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LILIA HELSTEA'S POV:

I'm shopping with Mommy and Lady Alice and Ellie. Ellie seemed a little bit disappointed that her brother didn't want to join us, so I was holding her hand to comfort her.

"Hey, Ellie. Do you like your big brother that much?"

"En! But he's a meanie for not shopping with us. I wanted to dress him up more," she pouted.

"Do you like me better or your big brother?"

After some time of thinking she just responded, "Umm... I like both!"

"Kukuku. Lilia, what are you asking Ellie?" my mom asked, pulling my other hand.

"Lilia, what do you think of Arthur?"

"Uuu he's a little scary. How is he so strong, Mommy? I thought kids like us couldn't be mages until we're all grown up?" It wasn't fair. I've always dreamt of becoming a mage and making Mommy and Papa happy.

My mom looked at Lady Alice, "I guess it's because he's a very gifted child. But Alice, do you really have no problems with everything he told you? I don't mean to butt in on your parenting, but doesn't it just seem a little too weird? How did he get so powerful during this time? You've told me that he was pretty good at fighting even before the bandit attack."

I saw Lady Alice shake her head. "Of course I know he's hiding a lot of things. He probably doesn't know, but it's pretty obvious when he's lying. He tends to focus his gaze on one point and his voice turns monotone when he lies. It's pretty cute how he thinks he's being sneaky, actually. Sigh. Tabitha, I know he's keeping things from us and so does Rey, but we agreed on giving him some space until he's comfortable

enough to tell us himself. I guess that's just what it means to be a parent. I know he doesn't mean any harm, so all we can do is just support him until he's ready."

"Lying is bad!" Little Ellie declared.

I agreed with her on that. "Yeah, Ellie! Lying is bad!"

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

I start concentrating on my mana core, distracted by a series of unexplainable sneezes.

I was getting too impatient with my training. I wanted to hurry up and get to the previous level in my past life, but that wasn't happening as fast as I wanted it to.

The little fight with Director Goodsky made it all too real for me. I was too inexperienced and weak. It didn't really affect me until now, but I wasn't used to fighting the way mages fought in this world. The fact that there was nothing like conjurers in my previous world made fighting one a lot more difficult.

My concentration wavered while my mind flashed back to my past life. The scene on that foggy night when the orphanage's head caretaker, the closest thing to a mother figure I had, was shot. I was still young at that time, but if I think back now, that was probably the reason I had started training like a madman. Head Mother was the one that picked me off the streets, giving me a steamed bun. After that, she took care of me, taught me how to read and write, scolded me, and taught me basic manners.

I didn't want to become a king; I just wanted vengeance. I just wanted to be strong enough to kill the ones responsible for the death of the person who had taken care of me... who had loved me. It was never as simple as that,

though. It had turned out that the ones responsible for killing the orphanage head caretaker, along with other leader figures of the various orphanages, were in the military from another country.

I realized then that no matter how powerful an individual was, he was still just one person. I needed authority along with my power. Becoming a king then served its purpose. The first thing I did when I was appointed King was destroy that country. I bloodied my hands with the corpses of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and millions all together. The cruel thing, though, was that no matter what kind of revenge was taken, it didn't change what had happened to her. She still had died an unjust death.

This life was going to be different. I wasn't going to let the ones I treasured suffer.

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Sylvie nudged her wet nose at me, a concerned gaze fixed on my eyes. 'I'm here, feel better,' was what she seemed to say to me.

Petting her head, I stirred myself out of my unpleasant memories.

I washed myself off, laughing at the crying Sylvie who still hated getting wet. I was glad I had her by my side. It wasn't healthy for me to be alone thinking by myself for too long.

Just on time, the girls got back from their shopping trip by the time I had finished dressing up. I hopped down the stairs to greet them.

"Hmph! Brother is a meanie!" My sister just puckered her lower lip with her arms crossed.

"Is it because I didn't go shopping with you, Ellie? I'm sorry." I patted her turned head, which made her tense her face as she forced herself to keep from smiling.

“How was shopping, Mom, Lady Tabitha? Did you guys buy a lot of stuff?” I asked, my hand still on my sister’s head.

“We didn’t buy much, just a couple of new outfits for Ellie and Lilia,” my mother responded.

At this time, I heard a storm of footsteps coming toward us. Vincent arrived beside us with an excited look on his face. His eyes were a little red and he had an uncontrollable smile on his face.

“You guys are finally here!” He said picking up his daughter and kissing her cheek.

“Honey, why are you so flustered? Have you been crying? What is going on?” Tabitha had a bewildered look on her face from confusion and worry. Vince did look a little crazy right now.

“You didn’t tell them yet, Arthur?” He faced me, the goofy smile still pasted on his face.

Shaking my head, I chuckled, “I just got down as well. I was about to tell them.”

“Tell us what, baby?” My mother had a look of concern as well. Mothers never liked not knowing what was going on.

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“I discussed with Mr. Vincent about teaching Ellie and Lilia mana manipulation starting today. Of course, only if Lady Tabitha is okay with it.”

“...”

Tabitha just shook her head, looking at her husband. “W-Wait, hold on. Is this some sort of prank? If it is, it’s not funny.”

“No, ma’am. I know both you and Sir Vincent aren’t mages, but it is possible for Lilia to become one.” I gave her a sincere look.

“N-No way. I’ve never heard of a method for teaching someone mana manipulation.

I’ve been taught that it’s up to the child’s innate talent to awaken by herself. Why haven’t I heard anyone else teaching kids then?”

Tabitha had a lot harder time believing that Lilia could become a mage than her husband. I didn’t blame her, though. Vincent didn’t even question me, which was surprising. The biggest worry for a mother from a noble family was the future of her children, and in a society where mages are the elites, the Helstea’s lineage, no matter how rich they were, would get more than a few looks of pity.

“I’ve never heard of anything like teaching a child mana manipulation either, Art. How do you plan on doing this?” my mother quizzed.

“Mom, you guys all know how I awakened at the age of 3, right? I still remember what happened and why I did. I’m going to do what I did on myself to them. I’ll have to test them before I can even start, but for Ellie, I’m 100% sure she’ll be able to awaken and for Lilia, around 70%,” I answered. The probability was higher than what I said for Lilia, but I didn’t want to get their hopes up too much. There was still a chance she wouldn’t be able to awaken.

“Heavens. T-This is... Give me a minute. I need to sit down.” I noticed Tabitha’s knees were wobbling as she made her way to the couch.

“This isn’t going to be an instant thing. It’ll take a few years for them to awaken on their own after I teach them.”

The Helstea parents just nodded at this and I turned to face the confused Lilia and Ellie.

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“Ellie, Lilia, can you guys sit down on the floor over by the fireplace?” I instructed, guiding them into the living room. “I want you guys to sit in your most comfortable position, back to back. Leave some space so I can sit in between.”

Ellie was still a little clueless as to what was going on, but Lilia had gotten the gist of what was happening and I could see the determined look on her face. Ellie sat down with her legs stuck out in front of her while Lilia sat in a more ladylike position with both her legs tucked in on her left side.

“Okay. Before I do anything, I want you guys to close your eyes and concentrate. If you try really hard, you’ll be able to see some spots of light. Do you see it?” I placed myself between them now as Tabitha, Vincent, and my mother all stared intently.

“...”

“N-No... I don’t really see anything,” I heard a murmur from Lilia. I expected as much, but I turned to see everyone with looks of panic on their faces. Ignoring them, I turned to face my sister and asked her the same thing. I was less afraid of her seeing the light, but not recognizing what to actually spot.

Thankfully, she responded, “Bruhder, I think I see a small pretty light!”

The next step involved doing something that only I was capable of doing. I had to will mana of all four elemental attributes at once into their bodies. Doing this, they would be able to see a lot more clearly the specks of mana that were scattered in their bodies.

“Okay, I’m going to start now. You guys will feel a little feverish, but I want you guys to endure it and just focus on the specks of light.” As soon as I said that, I willed my quadra elemental mana into them.

The reason that all four elements had to be exerted into them was because the mana that had yet to gather and form a mana core was at its purest form,

meaning all four elements needed to be exerted at the same power into their bodies to trigger any sort of responses from the dormant mana inside them.

“Eep!” “Hng!” Lilia and Ellie yelled out a little in surprise.

“I-I think I see some of the lights! They’re so pretty!” exclaimed Lilia.

“Wow! So many!” echoed my little sister.

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“Okay, this part is important. I’m going to help you guys with this part, but your job is to try and connect all of the little lights, okay? Do you get that, Ellie? Pretend that all of the little lights are friends and they need to meet together. Can you do that for me, Ellie?” This was the trickiest and longest part and I had to make sure that they understood what to do.

“O-Okay! I think I get it!”

“The lights are friends? Okay!”

I remained in my position for over an hour to trigger the dormant mana in their bodies, at least to the point that they would be visible enough for them to manipulate and gather.

Taking a deep breath, I removed my hands from their backs, instructing them to continue gathering the little lights until the lights disappear.

“How is it? D-Do you think Lilia will be able to become a mage?” Both the Helstea parents were a mess. They had anxious looks on their faces while Vincent was nervously chewing on a fingernail. I looked at my mother and even she had a hint of uneasiness in her eyes.

I responded with a wide smile. “Don’t worry, both Lilia and my little sister should awaken as mages within a few years. My plan was to do this with them every day for the few months that I’d be home. By then, they should be capable of training on their own to form a mana cor...”

Tabitha didn't even let me finish as she picked me up into a big hug. "Oh thank you thank you thank you. My baby will be able to learn magic! Oh my goodness, I was so worried what her future would be like since both of us aren't mages. *Sniff* Uuu...

thank you so much, Arthur."

Vincent's face was streaming tears as he kept his gaze on his daughter, meditating. My mother patted my head silently, giving me a proud smile.

It wasn't as big of a deal for Ellie to become a mage since our whole family could use magic. The chances of her never awakening would have been slim to none even if I didn't do anything; I was just speeding up the process. I had figured the faster she learned magic, the faster she would be able to protect herself.

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The two girls lasted a couple of hours before the mana I exerted dispersed out of their bodies. Surprisingly, Lilia actually lasted longer than Ellie. She definitely had more willpower than my four-year-old sister.

My father came a bit after from the Guild Hall and was ecstatic for the Helstea family that they were going to have their first mage in the family.

Picking up Eleanor and rubbing his beard on her cheek, my father just cooed, "Aww, my little baby is going to be strong like her older brother! Promise me you won't be stronger than father, okay? Or he'll be very sad."

My mother just laughed at this while my sister just giggled, pushing Father's face away.

"Papa! Your beard tickles! St~op, hehe!"

We had a great dinner party that night. Vincent and Tabitha went all-out on the delicacies, leaving my mouth watering and Sylv drooling right next to

me. We ended the night with everyone merry, Vincent going around offering drinks to even the maids and butlers.

The following days had consisted of condensing my mana core and my elemental skills along with my dragon will's powers. This was a mind-numbingly slow process, and I felt myself stagnating because of the lack of stimulation.

I spent a few days out of the week sparring with Father, but I could tell he was afraid of hurting me, always holding back, even when it was unnecessary.

Besides my training, I spent a couple of hours every day watching over my sister and Lilia while they continued their journey to form their cores. It was a strenuous process, and I could see my sister becoming a bit more impatient with the training, but I did my best to help her through it by making games out of it.

During this time, I got to talk to my mother about her abilities as an Emitter. I asked how she was able to learn it and train it when there were so few Emitters and she smiled at me mysteriously, saying how a woman needed to have a few secrets of her own.

I guess I would have to ask her again when she was feeling less secretive.

Two weeks before my birthday and the start of my career as an adventurer, I was startled by loud, obnoxious knocks on the front door. Opening the door, the faces of

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the all too familiar group made my lips curl up.



PdF by: traitorAFZEN

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